


Gladys Schmitt

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Alexandra

BOOKS BY GLADYS SCHMITT

THE GATES OF AULIS · DAVID THE KING · ALEXANDRA

GLADYS SCHMITT

Alexandra



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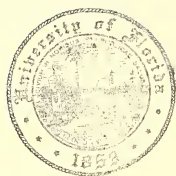
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Alexandra

PART ONE



IF ANYTHING can spoil an evening for my husband, it's one of those futile discussions about what might have occurred if things had been different. I sit on the edge of my chair when anybody suggests that we "try to figure out how it would have been if Roosevelt had pushed through a few real socialistic measures back in '32." And, if he is exasperated by conjecture on a national scale, he will be equally put out by such a limited piece of speculation as, "If Alexandra had never come back to this city, never met Les Talbot, never walked with him in the garden that rainy October afternoon, do you suppose. . . ." No, I can very well imagine his reply.

"Let it alone, Sophie," he'd tell me. "You're not trained to analyze anybody."

And if I tried to point out to him that I'm not a psychiatrist trying to work a cure, but only an onlooker trying to get a clear picture of what's beyond all curing now, he'd shrug and shake his head.

"All right, go ahead, if you get any satisfaction out of it. But isn't that whole Alexandra business over and done with? Can't you make yourself let it alone?"

No, I'll not be letting it alone. Somewhere in this second half of my life I will find out what she did during those three days when she stayed in New York. Somehow I will find the explanation for the burst of annihilating anger that she let loose on Les Talbot. And in the meantime, I cannot hide Alexandra as my husband hides her, under the anti-labor legislation and the Russian veto and the British machinations in Palestine. I will have to have some picture, even if it is a distorted picture. What I create out of my confusion will be undependable, and useful only to myself. For in this case the eye that sees is blurred by the magical mists that stand between us and the good gone years, and the hand that draws cannot make a true line because of the coldness that has been upon it since that November afternoon—no, nor a harsh line, either, since from the beginning it has been tentative and shaken with love.

I suppose I ought to mention at once that I am a Jew. The proper term is "Jewess," of course, but I have never managed to attach my person to that word. Sir Walter Scott put a dark, basaltic gleam upon it for my class and generation. Ever since *Ivanhoe* became required reading in the public schools, a Jewess has been a highly particularized species, all roses and marble and ravens' wings. But I am no Rebecca. "Tawny" would be the kindest word you could apply to me. My hair would be red if it weren't so brown; my eyes would be green

if they weren't so gray. I am small and squat, and people are always reminding me that I am warm to touch. I am, then, a tawny and emancipated Jew; I do not have an aquiline nose, nor do I light the candles on Friday evenings; but I am nevertheless—and I state it here because I sense that it is a vital factor in the story—a stranger born within the gates, a Jew.

If anything other than her loneliness drew Alexandra Hill to me in those early years, it was my Jewishness. Something in our closed-in, amber-colored way of living attracted her. She always wanted to walk into Bloomfield with me to see what she called “the consecrated chickens” sticking their heads through the wooden bars. She was forever tagging along with me to Snyder's grocery store, where she could touch the wrinkled purple olives and watch the disdainful women toss the herrings back into the barrel of brine. Even when we were nine together, she had a sense of being shut out. She longed to be a part of our warm world, and she loved me the more because I was the one who could let her in.

I haven't the faintest recollection of the first time I set eyes on Alexandra Hill. It must have been in school, early in February, that winter when she skipped half a grade into our 5-B class. She had started school late because of illness; we two were of the same age and should have been in the same grade from the beginning; but it was weeks before I found that out. In the interim, I thought of her as a precocious alien from another room, a pale, silky-haired girl with narrow hands and feet, so slight and unassertive in her chair

that, when she stood up to recite, she amazed you by being taller than yourself. If I try to see her face as it was in those early days, I see it always isolated from other faces—alone and white and startled in front of the blackboard, alone and dark-eyed and solemn in the four o'clock dusk, in the schoolyard, near the Indian toby tree. Maybe there was never a particular moment when, in so many words and gestures, we made ourselves known to each other. Remembrances as sharp as mine must have been the product of much long staring, and perhaps we had stared at each other so often and so earnestly that the first word was an anti-climax, a coldness and a falling-off after the warm, still looks. At any rate, I don't remember a beginning. I only know that there was a time when she did not stand waiting for me at the schoolyard gate, and then, afterward, there was another time when she was always there.

Sometimes I wonder how it would have been to have seen her for the first time the way Les Talbot saw her. I go so far as to try to be Les Talbot, to feel the agonizing toothache that kept him sitting in a dentist's chair until it was too late for him to make the first act of Shaw's *Saint Joan*, until he felt so sick and shattered that he'd begun to wonder whether he could use his first floor ticket at all. I try to know how it was for him that evening, huddled down into the darkness of his seat and damning the Bastard of Orleans and the page-boy and the wind-from-the-west, holding his aching face in both his hands, and finding that his cheeks were slippery with uncontrollable tears. And then—I saw it four

times, and the last time it was still a jagged flash of light—then *she* comes in. No eagle could sail down with more hard, easy power. Armored, helmeted, her cape spread pinion-like against the buttresses and towers, she breaks upon your sight, and nobody stirred, everybody held black silence up like a chalice to receive the first clear water of her voice. Oh, no, Les Talbot told himself, it can't go on like this. Nobody, not even Alexandra Hill, can do that sort of thing for the better part of three hours. It's the helmet—she'll be mortal when the helmet's off. But later, with the helmet gone, there was the clean, childish sheen of her light brown hair. Then it's the armor, he thought; when she comes out of the armor, I'll come out of the spell. But in the last act, in her wretched black doublet and hose, she held him as the lodestar holds the compass: He mourned with her, shuddered with her, was dragged back to be burned at the stake with her, until fever mists thickened in front of his eyes and the pain in his face was inextricably intertwined with her pain. How is it possible, then, that afterward this same Les Talbot, when he followed her into her accursed, dripping garden—But no, that's one of the over-and-done-with things there's no use brooding about.

The thin young person who used to wait for me in the schoolyard bore no more resemblance to Les Talbot's mailed apparition than the naked caterpillar bears to the moth. I can remember some of the things that she wore in the old days: a brown monkey-jacket with a row of red buttons running down the visible bumps of her spine, a cherry-red jumper and a plaid wool dress all peacock-colored green and blue, sewed by her godly

grandmother, whose piety had asserted itself in a chaste white collar that buttoned very tight at the throat. Sometimes I would wonder on my way to school what she would be wearing that morning, and more often than not I made the right guess. There wasn't much scope for speculation; her clothes, like mine, were solid but few.

In our grade school days clothes were no small matter. Children had not yet acquired the blessed right to hide the sparseness of their means or the dullness of their derivation in sweaters and skirts and low-heeled moccasins. Conspicuous consumption began in kindergarten, and what you wore was the badge of your class, as unmistakable as the ditch-digger's shoes. Since we were both achingly aware of that fact, I counted myself fortunate to have somebody now who sought me out, who would sometimes, in a fit of embarrassing but gratifying affection, play with my string of coral beads and talk straight into my eyes and grab and squeeze my hand. True, she was not pretty—she was skinny, her hair was lank in rainy weather, and sometimes there were dark circles under her eyes. True, she wore black stockings and must certainly live in a mess of a house, seeing how painfully eager she was to find her way into mine. There were others, dusky Jewesses and ash-blond Nordic aristocrats, whom I would rather have walked home with. But who, save Alexandra, would have dragged all the way through the tawdry streets of Bloomfield, only to hang around for ten minutes at the door of my dingy apartment house and then go walking home alone? In this world we take what we can get,

and what we can get often turns out to be—not perfect, of course, not a golden apricot, but like a little, wrinkled, purple olive—darkly, subtly, sourly sweet.

One wan, damp afternoon late in March of that same year, she and I were having our usual talk on the pavement in front of the apartment house when I suddenly saw that my mother was leaning against the parlor window and staring down on our heads. I tried to catch her eye and felt, rather than saw, that I had caught it—looking at my mother was always confusing because the lenses of her glasses were so thick that her eyes seemed to spread out, all soft and pansy-colored on the glass, and you could never quite tell whether she was looking at you or at the wall. She nodded, slowly and thoughtfully, and smiled. And later, when I was taking off my overshoes at the top of the back steps, she came out with a dust-cloth in her hand and began to talk to me.

“Sophie,” she said, “what is the name of that little girl you are always talking to down in the street?”

“That’s Alexandra Hill. She skipped into my grade this year.”

“She’s a very nice, clean little girl, this Alexandra. Does she live here in this neighborhood?”

“Oh, no, she just walks me home every night. She lives over on the other side of the bridge, in Shady-side.”

“She lives in Shadyside and she walks you home every night? Is this the way I brought you up, so that you don’t ask her to come upstairs? Ask her to come for supper next Friday.”

(My mother had a memorable voice. I can make myself hear it whenever I want to, even though it has been still these last eleven years. I always think of it as a Polish voice; when I hear it I see flat country—brown land and gray water and intermingled wheat and rushes, all blurred by mist. And sometimes, particularly when I am very tired, I hear her speaking through my throat. How many times have the two of us said together, "It's cold, put on your overcoat," or, "Look up and down every time before you cross the street," or, "Alexandra, come upstairs and drink a cup of tea?")

Alexandra did not walk home with me Friday afternoon. Her mother had given her to understand that one changed one's dress before going to a dinner party, and my first social venture was so dignified by Mrs. Hill's terminology that I could only nod emphatically. I was glad, anyway, to have a little time to myself. We had just bought a dining room suite—big, pompous, and grayish-tan—and I intended to wax this new magnificence. If one were giving a dinner party, one's dining room suite should break upon one's guest in a dazzling, glassy shine. Our farewells in the schoolyard were impressive, if somewhat constrained. Annette Freimeyer in her best bengaline could not have said more gravely, "You'll be at my house at five, then?" Nor could Sally Tarbell have answered with more cultivated nonchalance, "At your house at five or thereabouts."

Alexandra came at exactly five o'clock—my heart jumped like a fish when the doorbell rang through the tense quietness. She had changed from her cherry-colored jumper into nothing more exciting than her

peacock plaid; but her collar had been washed and starched and gave her face a kind of clerical severity, and her oxfords were as bright as our chairs.

I told her that her shoes looked very nice.

"My father shined them for me. They do look nice, don't they? Thank you very much," she said.

I remember that we were acutely uncomfortable during the early part of the evening. Ubiquitous pairs of quotation marks seemed to hang in the air above every phrase we uttered; we were trying, consciously and painfully, to produce a reasonable facsimile of the sort of thing said on such occasions by people of the better class. This sorry effort, together with the new and depressing realization that we had come to each other from unlike and unfamiliar places, made for a poverty of real talk and a superabundance of "Thank you's" and "If you please's" and "Pardon me's." Alexandra's first move was in the direction of the candlestick. (In spite of my father's jocular reproaches, my mother lighted the candles every Friday night.) She stood at the end of the table, staring at the gilded branches with exaggerated admiration, her scrubbed face spare and shiny in the light of the seven flames. "It's perfectly beautiful," she said, wringing her hands. "Do you burn candles like that for supper every night?"

I told her that they were religious candles and were lighted only on Fridays and holidays.

"To make the supper holy?"

"Well, no, not exactly. I don't really know. You'd better ask my mother. I think they're for the dead."

"For the dead?" She looked at the shadowy wall be-

yond the table. I do not know what she saw there, but I saw my Grandfather Goldspinner in his grave-clothes, gazing at me with unseeing eyes. "Do the dead come back and see them?" she asked in a reverent voice. "You know, every Easter Sunday our Lord Jesus Christ rises out of his grave." I glanced at her again and found her more alarming than Grandpa Goldspinner. She was standing straight and rigid; her face was as blank and white as the table cloth. Then she smiled and moved her shoulder blades—I could hear them jolt in their sockets. "I was just wondering," she said apologetically, "how a person would feel if he was rising from the dead."

Any contributions that I might have offered on that lugubrious subject were suspended by the realization that my father had come home. He was in the kitchen, humming and washing his hands at the sink. I looked over my shoulder, wondering whether he had heard us and would say tonight at the table that here was another one of those fairy tales that scare the wits out of little children——Rise from the dead——had we ever seen anybody rise from the dead? Meanwhile, Alexandra turned whiter still; she had misinterpreted my look; she was convinced that to mention the name of Jesus in a Jewish dining room was to commit an unforgivable impropriety. "I'm awfully sorry. I beg your pardon," she said.

And before the arrival of my mother and my father, my brother and my sister, the fish, the cucumbers, and the noodles, I had time to say only, "Oh, it's nothing at all."

Although my brother and sister did a great deal of shouting and banging all through supper, although my father gave us the usual account of amusing and maddening things that went on at his tailor shop, although my mother kept scolding the children and asking us whether we liked the chicken, I remember that meal as one of the most silent meals I have ever managed to eat my way through. Alexandra was always losing her napkin and forgetting to pass things. In school she knew most of the answers and made interesting speeches, but tonight she said nothing but, "Oh, I'm so sorry," and, "Certainly," and, "Yes, if you please." If she said once she said six times that the chicken was delicious, which was particularly distressing since she barely touched her chicken. In fact, I began to wonder whether she could be a vegetarian; she nourished herself almost exclusively on cucumbers and bread. "Look here, now, Alexandra," my father said, "you better put some food in your stomach. You're a skinny one, you should eat." I looked at my mother, whose feelings were bound to be hurt—her beautiful noodles were sprawling over Alexandra's plate, and pieces of white meat still clung to Alexandra's chicken bones. But my mother only smiled. "Leave her alone, Jake. The next time she comes, she'll eat. You didn't touch your cucumbers yourself." "*Can* I come back?" Alexandra said. "Sure," my mother told her. "Come back next Friday. If you want to, come back always, every Friday night."

While we were carrying out the dishes—all of us, even my four-year-old brother and Alexandra made trips to the kitchen with silver, china, salt shakers, and

lemon rinds—my mother told me that my friend and I might have the dining room to ourselves that night. My father hid behind a portiere and the newspaper in the parlor; my mother took the children into the kitchen, and Alexandra and I were left alone.

"These are perfectly beautiful chairs," she said. But she did not sit on any of them. She sat on exactly that part of the couch where the leather had split, and she moved her legs uneasily because, even with the India print between, you could feel the horsehair stuffing bulge through.

"Are you sure you had enough to eat, Alexandra?"

"Oh, yes, I never ate so much in my life. I especially liked the chicken."

"But you didn't touch the chicken——"

She had not heard me. She coughed and wet her lips with the tip of her tongue. "I wonder if I could lie down," she said.

"What's the matter? Don't you feel very well?"

"Oh, yes, I feel wonderful. Only I have to try something out. I keep thinking about it, and then I can't talk about anything else. I've got to try out how you feel when you rise from the dead."

"What?"

"Honestly, it'll only take a minute, and then we can talk. You see I——"

I sat down on the floor in utter amazement. She had fallen backward, first very loose and then very stiff, against the India print. Nobody, not my Grandfather Goldspinner, had ever looked as dead as she. Her open mouth, her half-closed watery eyes, her rigid separated

fingers, the upturned soles of her oxfords—all of them were horribly dead.

“Alexandra Hill, for God’s sake——”

“Sh. Don’t you dare get scared, you know I’m alive, and don’t take the name of the Lord our God in vain. I’ll only have to be dead for about two minutes, and then I’ll rise.”

What she conjured up there on the lumpy couch, in the light of our seven-branch candlestick, was no romantic, childish masque of death. It was rigor mortis, physical and raw. As her two minutes ticked away, she forced so hideous a realization of extinction upon me that I wanted to give her a sound slap in the face. But I was powerless to touch her. I could no more have laid a hand upon her than I could have picked up a dead rat in the street. Then, just when I was on the point of screaming, the resurrection began. She stirred, but so subtly that I could scarcely believe my eyes; the change in her body was the same fluid change that heat waves work upon the outline of a distant hill. I stared at her and remembered how last April I had stared at a cocoon, a sooty, cottony ball in a brick crevice, transformed into a miracle by a portentous, joyous, inward shuddering. She shuddered. Her fingertips trembled, and her eyelids quivered over her liquid eyes. Stiff and awkward with long dampness and cold, she sat up and moved her shoulder blades and got to her feet. Suddenly she was walking. Because she held her skirt against her thighs, I told myself that she was walking among tombstones. She walked toward something, and, by the sway of her body and the listening look on her

face, I imagined that she was walking toward the sea. Gray sea before, and white gravestones behind, and there, in the flat expanse of sand between, our candlestick, a little driftwood fire. She spread her hands above the seven flames, and I saw the bones, shadowy against the rosy blood. Then somebody coughed out in the kitchen, and the room was a room again, and she was leaning against the table, blinking and shaking herself. "That's it. That's the way it feels," she said, and sat down, blushing and laughing, on one of the chairs.

I blushed with her, but I was incapable of laughter. It was as if she had involved me, if not in a sin, at least in an obscene rite. I believe she guessed as much and wanted to forget the whole occurrence, was more than willing to settle down now to a lively discussion of what Mitchell Hogue said to the principal on Wednesday afternoon. But I could not execute such nimble transitions. "What makes you *do* such things?" I said.

"I do them all the time, whenever I'm alone."

"What *for*?"

"I can be anybody. I can be Galahad seeing the Holy Grail and Lady Jane Grey getting her head chopped off. I can be a monkey in a palm tree or a seal on a glacier. Want to see?"

"No, not now." I glanced at my father's newspaper, visible in the split between the portieres. "What I want to know is how you learned to act dead like that?"

"I saw an accident once. Two cars ran straight into each other at the corner of Center and Bellefield, and there was a dead man put into the back of one car, and his feet——"

I shuddered.

"Besides, last week my father went hunting, and he brought home a dead rabbit. I held it in my lap and felt it all over. It was as stiff as a board, and——"

"How could you hold a horrible dead rabbit in your lap?"

She was aggrieved. She looked at her knees and made a stroking movement over the place where the rabbit's head must have lain. "I wish you wouldn't call him a horrible dead rabbit," she said. "The rabbit couldn't help it because he was dead."

In that cheerless minute I thought with nostalgia of the usual Friday evening, corpseless and resurrectionless, and I wished I had never asked her to eat supper at my house.

Nevertheless, Alexandra did not fail to take up my mother's standing invitation to Friday night supper, and I gradually fell into the habit of going regularly to her place. Much later, in the lyrical summer of our fourteenth year, I remember that we had another memorable discussion, this time about love. We were sitting in Alexandra's back yard, under the buckeye tree, in the presence of a big, grave, vacant moon. It must have been a Wednesday night, for I ate my supper every Wednesday now with the Hills—Mr. Hill, Mrs. Hill, Alexandra and myself sitting each at his own side of the table, the pot roast covered with rich flour gravy, the peas and carrots succulent, the house clean and orderly without little children, and not a mess at all. She lived on one of those trim residential islands that

maintain themselves against the inward tide of business—six or seven carefully kept streets bounded on two sides by automobile showrooms, on a third by stores, and on the fourth by a glossy, humming boulevard. Her house was one of five gray frame ones built in a close row and trimmed, through neighborly unanimity, with fresh green paint every other spring. There were lace curtains at the windows, and there was a trellis between the porch and the street, a wire trellis fastened to the porch railing and overgrown by a thick, dark, purple-flowering clematis vine. If something in Alexandra's bearing had given me to understand that she lived in a poor place, that was Alexandra's way, and I did not take much stock in it anymore. Whatever was hers, she was bound to disparage, not with words and smiles only, but in her quaking heart.

We were out in her small back yard, she had just finished giving me Mark Antony's funeral oration—not the way they did it at school, but the way it ought to be read. I had been sitting for more than ten tense and exhausting minutes, with the back of my head pressed against the bark of the tree. I no longer tried to avoid these scenes of hers by saying that I was tired or by diverting her attention to something else. If I was to be her friend at all—and I no longer dared to think what the evenings would be like without her—I had to watch and listen; to reject her wild performances was as unthinkable as refusing to use her comb or her folding cup. These days I was thankful enough if only she drew no other witness in, and I felt particularly kindly toward her tonight because she had relinquished her desire to

stand and spread her thin arms wide. Out of consideration for me, and because of the lighted window in the kitchen next door, she had merely lain flat on her back in the grass, saying the words in a passionate voice but keeping her body as still as a stone.

She was wearing a voile dress, sleeveless, gathered at the neck and waist, and patterned all over with multi-colored flowers. It was a bought dress, one of those "finds" that you drag from a rack of tawdry stuff in the bargain basement. Her grandmother had been dead these six months; and, if Alexandra's clothes had lost much in seemliness and solid workmanship, they had gained a certain fantastical fluidity. Ripples of flowered voile wandered over her long, flat body and were raised almost imperceptibly by the small rounds of her breasts. Her straight brown hair had been washed that day and looked like a baby's hair in the moonlight. Her eyes, really rather small, seemed larger than they were because of their intense darkness and the narrowness of her face. Her nose was strong and thin, with a Semitic curve at the bridge—she was plainly delighted when I told her so. But the part of her face below the nose was much too slight: both the mouth and the chin were childish and sweet. "Weakness," some people thought; and others, like Les Talbot and myself, thought, "Tenderness."

Anyway, she was lying there on the grass, in her voile dress, getting her breath after, "O pardon me, thou bleeding piece of earth" and looking through the black buckeye leaves at the solemn face of the moon. She seemed to be more concerned with the moon than

with me, and, after my long forbearance, I felt that I did not deserve her remoteness. "What are you thinking about?" I said.

"About being an actress. I've got to be an actress."

I was alarmed to hear it, because there was something bizarre and ridiculous in the notion that anybody I knew should walk across a stage—especially she.

"What do you want to be an actress for? You'd think a person couldn't be happy unless he was famous."

"I would like to be famous," she said, still staring at the white disk beyond the leaves. "I'd like to be famous so that everybody would. . . ."

I finished the sentence in my own mind and shook my head. No, it would never be the way she wanted it. There would never be a time when multitudes would shift in their seats, straining for a clearer view of so frightened and insignificant a face.

"So that everybody would what?" I said.

"So that everybody would love me."

In those days everybody was loving Dolores Del Rio. We had seen her on the screen in *Ramona*, being loved by a bland, soft Spaniard and a sardonic Indian. We had even seen her in the flesh, at one of the big downtown movie houses, where the master of ceremonies handed her an overwhelming bouquet and sang straight into her face, "I'll Always Be In Love With You." But between the silver and velvet world in the front of any movie house and the dark aisles of seats below, there was an impassable divide. If she thought she could pass it, if she thought she could be lifted up, then she was a damned fool and she would break her own heart. "Look,

Alexandra," I said, taking her moist hand, "what do you want everybody to love you for? One or two people to love you is enough."

"There's no use discussing it. We don't understand what either of us means when we say 'love.' "

I was betrayed into my next question by a note of cold despondency in her voice. In this life the definition of "love" was bound to be a crucial matter. If she had a definition that I did not understand, it was likely to be one that nobody would understand; and that thought lent a curious insensibility to the white face of the moon. I played with her loose, damp fingers and asked her what she meant by "love."

I wish I could remember her discourse word for word. Lying awake these winter nights, with that same indifferent moon staring into my waking face and my husband's sleeping face, I have tried desperately to recall every word. No, I cannot remember. There is more sheer power of survival in the shooting stars of the columbines and the dark earnestness of her unblinking eyes. Anyway, it was a crazy hodgepodge, a wild union of the short discussion of the universe in the front pages of our geography book and the questions and answers in her Lutheran catechism.

There are two kinds of love, Alexandra said. There is the love of God—His love for us and ours for Him—and that is love celestial and triumphal, an indestructible, never waning, golden fire. You cannot feel it all the time; if you felt it continually, you would melt away, you would simply cease to be. But now and then you feel it. In a high wind passing at sunrise through

the tops of the trees you feel it; and you feel it when you stand before a certain painting of Our Lord Jesus in the Museum—the one with the red hair and the burning eyes. Then there are the other loves, all of them taken together—the earthly loves for mother and father and friend and lover, for the living cat and the dead rabbit—all of them moon-loves, reflections of the sun-love, and all of them the same. “The same, Alexandra? The same love for a brother and a lover? The same love between you and me and you and a dead rabbit? You don’t honestly mean the same.” Her answer I can remember clearly. She said with conviction and solemnity, either out of premature and dangerous wisdom or out of utter innocence, “The same, really. All of them a sort of reflection, like light in a mirror, and all the same.” And when you are an artist, when you act on the stage or sing like Caruso or paint a picture, then you are somehow fixed at the very crest of a great arc of merging light; you stand at exactly that point where the light of the sun and the reflected light of the moon touch upon each other; you are illumined from both sides by earthly and celestial love. There nothing can touch you, nothing can wound you. You are folded in a double nimbus, silver and gold, earthly and divine. . . . This, as accurately as I can remember it, was the matter of it. As for the manner of it—she frightened me. Her hands were limp, her body remained terribly quiet, and the corners of her mouth stirred in a strange, wise smile.

On that evening, as on many previous evenings, I

felt a strong temptation to state my own agnostic ideas about God, but I said nothing. Since her talk had been joyous, even ecstatic, I do not know why a heavy sadness, a fullness in my chest that made me unable to stifle a whole succession of sighs, should have settled upon me in the ensuing hush, nor why the garden, the neighbor's lighted window, Alexandra, and myself should have seemed achingly small under the vast sky that night. I know only that I was glad when she stood up and took me into the house to have a glass of root beer and a strawberry tart. The unstirring buckeye tree and the impassive moon seemed like good things to leave behind, to shut outside.

In the bright kitchen with the blue linoleum and the white chairs and table, we again made that transition, growing always more obvious and painful now, from the fantasy to the reality. I felt a surge of disloyal relief when her mother and father came in to have a bite with us. They had been sitting all through the summer evening on the front porch in the light of the street lamp and the heart-shaped shadows of the clematis vine. Probably they had been holding hands under cover of the cushions; quite unlike my own mother and father they held hands often. Whenever Mrs. Hill called down to us from the bedroom that we should look at the potatoes because she was dressing for dinner, we knew perfectly well that her dressing had nothing to do with dinner and a great deal to do with her husband's coming home. She was neat and curved and womanly, and there was a scent of clean womanliness about her—

sudsy bath-water, talcum, and newly washed, sun-dried hair. And Mr. Hill, coming brown and sweaty from his work, always paused in the kitchen to kiss her. The way my father helped himself to a long drink of water, he helped himself to an embrace.

Perhaps because they, too, had fallen to dreaming in the heavy richness of the August night, they did not lift the melancholy that was upon us. The conversation was dull and desultory, and I drank more root beer than I really wanted, simply because, "Could I please have another glass?" served to break the quietness.

"Alexandra," I said, standing on the front porch to say good night, "when you were little, did you use to crawl into your mother and father's bed?"

"Oh, yes, often." She tore off a clematis leaf, chewed it, did not like it, and laid it sadly and considerately on the porch railing. "I still go in and wake them up on Easter and Christmas and my birthday. What made you ask me that?"

"Nothing. It just came into my head and I wanted to know."

I suppose it was because I felt that she should have some place to go to when I was no longer there. Her flight to the gold and silver arc between the sun and moon had left her white in the face; she was drawn and peaked; sometimes she looked old, older than her mother, as old as a monkey or a stone. If I could think that she was sitting at the foot of their bed, I would fall asleep more easily myself.

But, looking back from the candy store at the corner, I saw her bedroom window, a yellow, isolated square

of light. And I knew that she—the poor, damned fool—had gone to nobody's bed but her own. I knew that she was lying with the blanket pulled to her chin, trying to say "O pardon me, thou bleeding piece of earth" in a way that would be acceptable to man—and God.

In high school it grew clear that Alexandra and I were a couple of unusually clever people. We were always close to the head of our class, and we would have tied for first place if Alexandra had not been hopelessly confused about mathematics and I had not been slightly bored by history. Our essays—every now and then I come upon one of them folded into a novel that I have not read for years—our essays were bold and imaginative; we distinguished ourselves in debates and class discussions; and the conversations that we carried on between Bloomfield and Shadyside were astounding ventures for girls in their teens. So far as I can remember, we did not suffer from what males consider the congenital female inability to look an abstraction in the face. Long afterward I discovered, to my amazement, that we had struggled, on the draughty bridge above the railroad tracks, with some of the elusive matters that had troubled Plato and Socrates.

I recall these high endeavors of ours with gratification, but without the slightest trace of complacency. I could not write such essays now; I doze these days when my husband's friends are analyzing Hegel under my nose; somehow, somewhere—perhaps in the comfortable prison of my own house, perhaps in the weary business of carrying and bearing children, perhaps merely because blood flows less freely through aging

arteries—much of that cleverness was lost. And, if we were singularly precocious in certain respects, we were singularly behindhand in others. No little imbecile, left alone with her own body to dream all day on a sunny doorsill, could have been more stupid about matters of love and longing than Alexandra and myself.

We were sixteen before we found out exactly how children were born. Our mothers had explained, of course — mine wearily and Alexandra's nobly — but neither of us really got the point until the day Emmanuel Saltzman told Alexandra and she told me. It was an act of gentlemanly consideration on Emmanuel Saltzman's part. Alexandra got the notion that she might be pregnant because of some minor intimacies that had passed between them on the way through Schenley Park. Finding her unaccountably sorrowful, he insisted on hearing the cause of her distress, and then sat down on a bench with her in a dripping March thaw and explained the whole procedure with all the precision and delicacy that one might expect of a young man who had read Dante from cover to cover at fourteen. Once she and I had every detail of the matter figured out between us, we looked each other straight in the eye and admitted that, all the time, we had known as much. Not plainly, not so that you could put it into words, but in some inward, obscure, frightening manner, with the same mute knowledge that had convinced Alexandra that her grandmother was about to die, with the same blind understanding that had told me that the shrieks coming out of a Bloomfield slum were the shrieks of a woman bearing a child. I wish we had sur-

rendered ourselves to that dark certainty. We would have been better off if we had relied on its cruel honesty. Our elders went on explaining, either wearily or nobly, and we were deceived into thinking that we had a light, when we should have been learning to find our way around in the dark.

Anybody looking at my particular marriage from the outside might well wonder what I'm so sour about. After all, isn't he bound to me irrevocably, isn't my claim on him tripled by the claims of the children, isn't he caught here in this house of ours—the one male whom I wanted, body and soul, back in the days when we didn't even know how children were born, the lean, thin-skinned, cranky boy who used to clutch his head when the geometry teacher asked Alexandra Hill to explain an axiom? Am I not one of the few examples, in my wretched generation, of *amor triumphans*, wedded and bedded in spite of the depression and the miserable jobs in Public Assistance and the State Liquor Stores—\$95 a month, and prices so low that, if you didn't forget yourself and give a dollar to the first poor son of a bitch who knocked at the door to ask for bread and coffee, you could afford to go out once a week to see a movie, or could entertain a crowd on American cheese sandwiches and tea? Didn't they bear the appropriate fruit, those nights of muffled yearning when I lay awake alone, seeing him against a background of German lieder and the sonnets of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and hearing in the next room the heavy sighs and grunts of maternal and paternal sleep?

The little world in which we used to move—the

neighbors, the butcher and the grocer, my relatives, the people who went to school with us and still come to listen to our recordings on a Saturday night—all those who see my life from the outside think that Sophie Littman is a good, sensible girl who has three nice children and did very well for herself. Nobody thinks any such thing about Alexandra Hill. From the beginning, it was plain that Alexandra Hill was ungodly clever—could find half a dozen subtle meanings in a single passage of Shakespeare, could take any person or situation and peel it down, layer by layer, like an onion, until she had seen the core, could arrive in solitary meditation at the Platonic theory of Ideas and Realities, knew enough theology to confuse the Lutheran pastor, could salve the worst wound or pierce the thickest skin with the sweetness and bitterness of her tongue, and was, for all that, a fool, a poor damned fool.

So long as she had her Lord Jesus Christ to cling to, her experiences in love were sorrowful rather than tragic. While she conceived of the world as a shadow whose substance was paradise, whatever went wrong with her here could be rectified in the numberless aeons of the elsewhere; it was never too late, then, Evalyn Hope, and the Blessed Damozel could always lean forth from the gold bar of heaven. Because she was absolutely convinced of timelessness and of some inexpressibly intricate and beautiful pattern evolving out of God's mind through changing light and shade, she had the foolish strength to remain passive where Paul Zoldi was concerned. What anybody else would have considered morbid shyness in him seemed to her in-

vincible chastity, a high lack of concern with fleshliness. We were sixteen, the age of legends, and she believed in gods and demigods. This demigod of hers, this Saint Paul—and he was a highly presentable young man, even in his shabby clothes, pale, with high cheekbones and slanting hazel eyes—this Paul Zoldi had some rather peculiar notions of his own. Having read extensively in the wisdom of India, he reduced his diet to one bowl of rice in the morning and one at night—a noble design for purification, which collapsed one Wednesday afternoon when he fainted in the middle of an oral report on the nature and functions of the algae. For a while, I thought he was enamored of Alexandra, though I had no basis for thinking so except the faint flush that colored his cheeks whenever anybody mentioned her name. She buttressed my conjecture with the information that he went the long way around from history to the auditorium at noon, and seemed, at least to her presumptuous eyes, to lag a little in order to make sure of encountering her in the hall. Then, since the foundations for our hopes were so frail—she would never have intruded on his sanctified privacy by asking him to come over to Sophie's to listen to some records—the whole affair deteriorated and melted morbidly away before our eyes.

Years later, I saw this Zoldi again. My husband ran into him in the public library and brought him home, and we established, for three charged, nostalgic hours, a familiarity possible only with those whom we see once in a long succession of years and scarcely hope to see again in this world. One of us mentioned Alexandra,

and he blushed and smiled. "You know," he said, "I used to be in love with that girl. It lasted for years. Once I found an English paper of hers and carried it around in my wallet until it fell apart. I never think of her without thinking of that line of Rimbaud's—do you know it?—*par délicatesse, j'ai perdu ma vie.*" Which, freely translated, means "I have lost my life by being too high-minded." Maybe, if he had been less high-minded, less God-seeking, less remote. . . .

One afternoon in February in the middle of our sophomore year—I remember it very clearly: the clean sense of all the mistakes of the old semester washed away, new snow purifying the landscape beyond the window, and one early male cardinal, impressive herald of another spring, flying scarlet across our purplish, smoky dusk—one afternoon Alexandra failed to meet me in the lonely bustle of the locker room, and I stood with my wraps on and a pile of books in my arms, tormenting myself by wondering how it would be if she never met me there again, knowing the frail and fleeting nature of even the most secure human connections, and half hating, half enjoying a poignant sense of loss. How long I stood there, I do not know. It must have been close to half an hour, because, by the time I made up my mind to move, everybody else was gone; even the lovers, who stood longest between the rows of lockers with their hands and forelocks touching, had wandered out into the quiet, snow-muffled streets. Then suddenly it occurred to me that I had better go and look for her. She might be in trouble, she might be ill, and if I were in such circumstances she would certainly

hurry down every empty hall and open every classroom door in search of me.

I did not have to seek very long; I saw the two of them, Alexandra and Emmanuel, standing under the Abbey pictures of the Knights of the Round Table in the corridor that leads to the principal's office. She was neither sick nor in difficulty, and certainly not irrevocably lost. Her image, as I perceived it at that moment, had the clarity of something reclaimed. Whenever I find myself losing the young Alexandra, I do not resort to dead photographs, I go back to that living minute, and there she stands.

She was positively emaciated that year. Her vigil before the haloed head of Paul Zoldi had given her back her clerical air; her cheeks and forehead were scrubbed to a shining whiteness; there seemed to be almost no flesh between her skin and her bones. Her hair was fairly long now, but she had gathered it into a kind of silky horse's tail, fastened with a barrette at the back of her neck. Now that I think of it, I know that she had done everything she could to erase from her person every possibility of prettiness. Her body also, rigid and attentive, had been reduced to a lean minimum, half by partial emulation of Zoldi—she lived that year on bread, cheese, milk, and fruit—and half by the crazy exercises that she did in her room at night. If you were to be an actress—and that necessity had grown more urgent with the years—you taught your body absolute submission: you stood on your hands, you bent yourself into an agonizing arc, you hung from a bar, you knelt motionless on the floor, with your head tilted backward,

for hours; you made yourself as neat and resilient as a reed, so that, in the end, there was something disturbing about the very chaste economy of your person, so that, even in a churchly navy blue woolen with pearl buttons from the waist to the chin, you looked at once oddly unearthly and the very essence of earthliness.

In the February dusk, Emmanuel Saltzman was staring solemnly at that spare, tempered body. I don't believe he knew that he was staring, but he was, and, before either of them raised their eyes to see me standing at the end of the corridor, I made a disapproving face.

My disapproval of Emmanuel Saltzman had its roots in one of those embarrassing, obscure Semitic troubles that are completely covered up with extraneous stuff at first and yield themselves to analysis only after a good many years. At the time, I told myself that I did not care for him because he thought of himself as a very superior person; now I know that I distrusted him because he directed a negative snobbishness against his derivation and my own. Not that he pretended he wasn't Jewish. He appeared regularly at the orchestra concerts with his wispy little mother, and, in the ardor of his desire to make her understand the significance of the music, he would often lapse into Yiddish and wave his hands about. But everybody in school knew that he was wretchedly in love with a certain Helene Blauvelt, the daughter of the brother of the French consul, a person of consequence and a Roman Catholic, a vital and intelligent girl who was none the less attractive because her skin was covered with the kind of delicate down that grows all over an apricot. If I screwed up my face

whenever I heard any reference to the Blauvelt-Saltzman agonies, it was not because I had any objection to mixed marriages; so far as I was concerned, people might marry African pygmies if they happened to want to; it was only because I recognized, however dimly, that this preoccupation with the female part of the Christian population was really a desire to rise out of a level that was thick with anger and humiliation and pain. *I* had no intention of rising out of it; I was stuck there for the rest of my days; and anybody who took his hat and departed left me a little more frightened, a little more alone.

Yet, even to my uncharitable eyes, Emmanuel Saltzman looked singularly pleasing that afternoon. His person, dignified and ample, had not yet quite lost the roundness of a child's; his fine, soft, violinist's hands played with the blind-pull that dangled above the window sill; his brown and serious eyes gazed through his shining spectacles; and one lock of auburn hair fell gallantly over his round white brow. I had a perfectly baseless conviction that he had been telling Alexandra something about Helene and had stopped short in the midst of it to stare at the little, compact breasts on either side of the row of pearl buttons. The talk and the stare were plainly private matters, because he grew uneasy when he caught sight of me.

"I think your friend is looking for you, Miss Hill," he said.

And she started and said, "Oh, Sophie! What time is it? Oh, Sophie, I'm awfully sorry, I just forgot."

After she had introduced Emmanuel and me to each

other, she began to talk, feverishly I thought, about my father's remarkable collection of Caruso records. While she talked, she slipped her arm through mine and closed her hand strongly over my hand. Maybe, I thought, she wants me to ask him to come to our house to hear the records; maybe she's weary of all this sickly business with Zoldi; maybe, while he was looking at her little bosoms, she was looking at the round, warm neck above his nice clean collar; maybe she's forgotten for the moment that he's in love with Helene. She was plainly running out of words. Her sentences rattled around jerkily, like a spool reeling off the last yard of thread. I was embarrassed and wanted to put an end to her talk. "Why don't you come over some evening and hear our records, Mr. Saltzman?" I said.

He smiled—his smile always reminded me of Byron, at once superior and suffering—and asked me to name an evening.

"Friday, Saturday, Sunday," I said.

"Friday is a concert night. Will Saturday do?"

"Can you come on Saturday, Alexandra?"

"I—I don't know—I guess I can come on Saturday night—— Mr. Saltzman, do you want to bring Helene?"

He looked meditatively at the blind-pull and shook his head. "No, thanks very much. Miss Blauvelt isn't in the habit of making—well, public appearances with me."

Alexandra opened her mouth to say she begged his pardon, but he swept the necessity away with another Byronic smile. Somehow we managed to extricate our-

selves. I don't remember the actual leave-taking, or the while that we spent in the locker room getting Alexandra's coat and books. I remember only that afterward she and I walked for a long time in complete silence down the empty, snowy street.

That silence was uneasy, but I bore it until we were close to the corner where our ways divided. Then I took her hand in its black knitted glove, and received, to my amazement, no answering pressure. "Are you by any chance annoyed with me?" I said.

"Annoyed with you, Sophie? How could I be annoyed with you?"

"Just the same, I'm certain you're annoyed with me."

She stopped under the street sign and turned and faced me. A few large, light flakes of snow were floating through the dusk; the sky was orange with winter sunset, and there was a glow on her bony little face. "Oh, why did you ask him?" she said.

"My God, didn't you *want* me to?"

She had given up reproaching me for taking the name of the Lord our God in vain. "Oh, Sophie, why ever would I want you to? Even if there hadn't been any Paul, Emmanuel wouldn't ever be interested in me. He's good-looking, and he's going to be a great violinist. Besides, he's terribly in love with Helene."

"Then why did you go on that way about the records?"

"I had to go on about something, didn't I? There wasn't anything to talk about, and I thought he would be interested in the records. I was awfully embarrassed, I don't know why."

"But you squeezed my hand, and I thought you were giving me a signal. . . ."

"Honestly, Sophie, that wasn't at all why I squeezed your hand. I squeezed your hand because I felt so sorry I forgot to come down to the locker. I felt awful, perfectly awful, and that was the only reason I squeezed your hand." She was fishing about in her coat pockets for her handkerchief with the urgency of one who is about to burst into tears.

"Alexandra, what on earth is the matter with you?" I said.

"I don't know, I just don't know." Tears ran over her tight, glowing cheeks, and she finally gave up trying to find her handkerchief and wiped them away with the back of her glove. "I guess it's because I was talking to him. We were talking to each other very closely. I was talking about Paul, without mentioning his name, of course, and he was talking about Helene. And oh, dear Lord, I don't want to talk to anybody like that, not close like that, not to anybody."

"Don't be silly. What's the matter with talking to a person? Really, it isn't anything to get so upset about."

"Yes it is, Sophie, yes it is!" There in the middle of the sidewalk she bent forward and embraced me. I accepted the embrace without constraint. Nobody was by to see it, except a huckster's horse, pawing the icy street and blowing clouds of steam into the still, bright air.

"If it is, you're crazy. It hadn't ought to be."

"Oh, Sophie, this is a terrible world. It isn't good, it isn't safe to let anybody see what you really think, to let anybody know what you're like inside. So help me

God, I'll never do it again. It isn't safe, Sophie, not with anybody, not with anybody but you."

With that, she turned her back on me and ran down the street. And I—perhaps because I had the melancholy conviction that we had come to the end of an epoch, perhaps because the high-heartedness of new snows and new beginnings is bound to end in tears—stood for five full minutes, weeping in the snow.

She was never going to talk to him that way again, never, so help her God—and that phrase was no empty oath in her mouth; she used it always and only as a conscious and fervent invocation of the deity. She told me and Our Lord Jesus Christ at least five times that future communications with Emmanuel Saltzman would be confined to such subjects as scholarship, books, and music; she made a hard, meager plait of the silky horse's tail; she put away a scarf of green-and-yellow Paisley that an aunt had given her for Christmas; she reread the Acts of the Apostles and learned by heart, as a mental discipline, one hundred and twenty important dates, beginning with 4241 B.C. She intended to memorize Burke's *Conciliation* after that, but she mastered only the first five paragraphs. For in spite of the geometrically straight course that she had charted for herself, in spite of her fixed look and her clasped hands, she fell to talking again, and found the talking utterly wrong and utterly sweet.

Not on that first evening when they came to hear the records at my place. Except for the discovery that he came for her sake and not for the music—he cared not

at all for vocal pyrotechnics and was the owner of several symphony albums and three of the Beethoven last-period quartets—that occasion was unproductive from a romantic point of view. At the last minute I had overridden my quaking shyness and invited my own boy to the affair, explaining that he might care to come because of his previous acquaintance with the other male visitor. “You two might want to talk about music to each other,” I said.

They certainly showed a marked propensity to talk about music to each other, and in such loud and sardonic tones, with so much concentrated venom that Alexandra and I were scared out of our wits. It seemed that Emmanuel Saltzman was of the opinion that Wagner, although he suffered from elephantiasis of the ego and did not have the faintest conception of form, was nevertheless a genius; whereas my young man found Wagner too disgusting to mention, a sloppy Germanic mess, a coarse voluptuary whose *Tristan and Isolde* sounded exactly like a couple of cats howling at mating season in somebody’s back yard.

That mention of the cats and their mating season was the one departure from abstract matters that night. All evening, during the Carusos, after the Carusos, and in spite of the sandwiches and tea, the sound and fury went on; and I said to Alexandra while we were getting the food together in the kitchen that those two must certainly hate each other like poison and would probably never speak to each other again.

They began to argue at eight-fifteen and stopped at eleven, or, rather, at eleven they carried their argument

down the stairs of our apartment house and out into the street. Certainly not because of any sense of male-to-female obligation, merely because their way happened to lie through Shadyside, they walked Alexandra home. She would have preferred to stay—she cast me one sorry look, mourning the party that had come to worse than nothing after I had tried to make it so gay, mourning the sandwiches eaten without thanks or praise, mourning my records, branded forever now as a collection unworthy of the attention of a serious music lover. I stood at the window to watch the three of them walking over the grayed and pock-marked snow. The boys were still arguing on either side of her; they were edging toward each other and pushing her a little to the rear; and, by the time they had reached the corner, she was walking a couple of steps behind them.

My sense of humiliation was shattering. While I washed the dishes and scraped the leavings of our dismal meal into the garbage can, the whole wretched business broke upon me: my party had been a fiasco; our feminine charm was such that two boys could spend three hours in our company without addressing more than twenty words to each of us.

I was more than surprised, then, on Monday morning, to find a note in Emmanuel's handwriting lying on my desk in Civics II. He was having a few people over to listen to music at his house next Saturday afternoon. Philip (my boy) would be there. Did I want to come? Did I think Alexandra would want to come, too?

I could scarcely bear the three morning classes that

kept me from the cafeteria, my friend, and the delight of telling an unbelievable piece of news. Her response was disappointing. She only stared grimly at her plate of cold macaroni salad and told me that she had received just such a note herself. "And furthermore, I have a notion to tell him I can't go because I have to practice for a ballet," she said.

I was startled. That was a blatant lie. She had no connection whatever with a ballet, and she had never told or even meditated a lie in my presence before.

"Oh, what's the use of doing that, Alexandra? We might as well go. Maybe they'll behave differently in somebody else's house."

"They were very rude to us."

"I know. Were they as rude as that on the way home?"

She went white and pushed away the macaroni salad, making a sick and disapproving face. "They never said a single word to me. Not one word, all the way home."

"Didn't *Emmanuel* say anything?"

"Today I stayed ten minutes after class in zoology and talked to Dr. Dysart. He's a very kind, gentle, intelligent man. He believes in the Darwin Theory, but he says that evolution is a confirmation rather than a disproof of the existence of God."

"What did *Emmanuel* say?"

"He said 'Good night.'"

"Is that all he said?"

She sighed and rested her cheeks upon her open palms, bending her head downward so that I could not see her eyes. "No, not quite. He said something else, but

he didn't mean it, of course. He only said it because he thinks it's what a person ought to say to a young lady at her door. He took my hand, and he said, 'Good night, my dear girl.' "

We went to see him that Saturday, of course. He lived in a district crowded with cheap little frame houses, on a street lined with tall poplars. All through the spring and summer they made a tremulous, quaking shimmer against the sky, and in the fall they cast their leaves down all at once—great, dusty, fragrant heaps of them, pale brown and dull gold. When he was little, these leaves offered almost inexhaustible possibilities of pleasure: you could wade through them, roll in them, bury yourself or your companions under them, and, when their charm was on the wane, you could consume them all in one alarming, glorious fire. Here, in this neighborhood, together with his Negro and Irish friends, he roasted sweet potatoes. Here he heard the "Meditation" from *Thais* floating out of a neighbor's window, felt a kind of melting death in his heart, and determined that he would play the violin. Here, when the game of Ground Hockey or Run, Sheep, Run went too well for him, he was shoved into the leaves and called a dirty Jew. Here, he was Beethoven storming against the stupid world on a wild winter night, or Jean-Christophe, with an unshaven beard and a rumpled shirt, grieving over a changed or unappreciative beloved. Here, he was his widowed mother's good and loving son, practicing the violin three hours a day for her sake and Beethoven's and his own—and in the worn

leather case, in the little compartment with the rosin and the extra strings, a photograph of Helene. . . .

We were a little late that day because I had kept Alexandra waiting at my house while I bathed the baby. I suspected that Emmanuel's offhand air was counterfeit; he had probably been staring down the street nervously in search of us; the gleam of his spectacles did not obscure the traces of strain and anxiety in his eyes. "Charlie Pryor's been playing Bach for Philip and me," he said. "You missed several preludes and fugues from the Clavichord." I felt some satisfaction at the note of complaint in his voice. If he had worried that we might not come, it served him right; it paid in some small measure for the miserable evening at my house.

We hung our wraps on the hall rack and came into a bleak parlor. The place was warmed and lighted against the stone-gray weather only by a Reznor stove—a low, black somber thing with yellow, whispering tongues of fire. Most of the room was occupied by an upright piano and a big circular table surrounded by six straight chairs. The phonograph, as glassy as my dining room table, stood in a corner under a charcoal sketch of Beethoven with a pursed mouth and knitted brows. There was nothing comfortable to sit on—no easy chair, no sofa. Only on the window sill, breaking the dreary expanse of uncurtained glass, was there any trace of brightness; there, in lusterless earthen pots, bloomed two begonias, three narcissi, and one velvety, many-flowering Persian violet.

"You have an awfully nice house, Emmanuel," Alexandra said.

That was no empty compliment on her part. I learned afterward that she, unlike myself, had been conscious of no grimness, none of the meaner features of poverty. She took it that the Saltzmans were superior people; they spent their money on record albums instead of needless yards of cretonne and lace; they did not pamper their bodies with sofa pillows and padded chairs. The Reznor stove seemed particularly noteworthy to her; the yellow flames made her think of altar fires in the chaste temples of Republican Rome.

With such a concept of the place, she could not possibly relax and make herself at home. She looked at the chairs, but could not immediately bring herself to sit on any of them; she shook hands with Charlie Pryor, the Negro pianist, so diffidently, so respectfully that I was afraid he might think she didn't want to touch his hand. Charlie Pryor—courteous, remote, and dreamy—was wedged between the keys of the piano and the potted plants, and could manage to rise only part way from the piano stool.

"Well . . ." said Emmanuel, rather miserably.

"Well!" said Charlie Pryor, nervously massaging his fingers.

"Well, when are we going to hear some more of the Clavichord?" Philip said.

I said nothing. I pulled out one of the straight chairs and sat on its cold seat. I laid my purse—my bright, new, patent leather purse with the metal clip—on the round table. Now it's starting all over again, I thought,

and I wished I might put my head down on my arms and fall asleep.

Alexandra maintained the amenities. "Where's your mother, Emmanuel?" she asked. "Aren't we going to have the pleasure of meeting her this afternoon?"

"I guess so. Later. She went out to get some rolls to eat with the tea."

"Oh, she needn't have bothered."

"It isn't any bother. The grocery's just downstreet. After all, Sophie had sandwiches," he said.

After that exquisite bit of polite intercourse, the conversation collapsed completely and Charlie Pryor began to play one prelude and fugue after the other. After half an hour or more of wordless listening, in a dazed and puzzled state, I asked, "What's a fugue?"

That was one of my happiest social blunders. My young man walked across the room, grabbed me by the arm, and pulled me to the piano. "Here, Charlie, let's show her," he said, holding onto my elbow in a transport of pedagogical enthusiasm. I had never been so close to him before. As long as I live, whenever I hear a Bach fugue, I'll feel his warm breath coming and going on my cheek, I'll smell the freshness of his clean shirt, I'll stop breathing for the fraction of a second while my eyes, for the first time, know the depth and color of his eyes.

Philip and Charlie Pryor and I had a wonderful time with fugues for the next hour. And where was Alexandra all this while? Kneeling on the floor before the Reznor stove, with the reflection of the yellow flames on her pearl buttons and her white bony cheeks, her

hands spread to the warmth, her lips slightly apart. And Emmanuel? On the floor, sitting on the floor beside her, talking, talking softly and continually, so that his voice seemed to be a running accompaniment to the soft whisper of the fire.

He was talking to her about love. Hopeless love and the artist. He and his violin and his futile passion for Helene. I wanted to sneer at him, but I couldn't. I had to give him the same grudging response that I was forced to give to such poems as "Bright Star" and "O Wild West Wind." What others considered beautiful, I often found embarrassing, and I feared the blush far more than I enjoyed the frightening, flower-like opening up of the heart.

"That same evening when we talked in the corridor," Emmanuel was saying, "after you were gone, I saw her standing alone on the steps outside, waiting for her mother to pick her up in their car. You know the bulletin board out there, the one where they keep the notices under glass? She was standing in front of that and looking into the glass and smoothing her hair. We didn't speak. We only nodded to each other. I don't know what it was—maybe it was the weather, the evening coming on and the fresh snow—I don't know what it was, but I felt exalted. There was a delicate light, a kind of glow from the sky on her face. You haven't read the *Divine Comedy*, have you? Well, Dante must have felt like that, meeting Beatrice in Paradise."

"Like the Fra Angelico picture of the Blessed?" she said, looking at him with bright, grave eyes.

"I'm afraid I don't know very much about painting.

But she looked extraordinarily beautiful—she isn't, you know, really as beautiful as all that—she had a beauty not of the flesh, not of this world. To see her like that was like having a snowflake melt on your cheek—wonderful—so good that any other contact would have made it less."

"I never felt like that," she said in a rueful voice. "Sometimes I tell myself that I feel like that, but I don't. When I see Paul pass, I'm not exalted. I'm empty, I'm lonely, it isn't enough. Maybe in another world I'll feel your kind of exaltation, but I've almost given up trying to find it in this world."

"But I assure you, Alexandra, you must learn to feel it." In his ardor, in his desire to convince her, he caught one of her thin hands spread before the fire and held it in both of his own. "It's the most uplifting love that we can experience. Every other love withers. It is, believe me, the only lasting love."

She shook her head. "My grandmother," she said, "loved my grandfather, in the flesh, on the world. He died when he was forty-two, and she lived ten years after he was gone. She thought of him every hour of every day, and because she thought of him, she wasn't afraid of death. Do you know what she said when she was dying? She said, 'Ah, now, at last I'm going to my dear love.'"

He shrugged, as I had shrugged so often, at her literal piety. "An artist makes his paradise here on this earth."

"I haven't seen it, I don't know."

"But if you mean to be an artist, my dear girl, you

must see it. You must learn to immerse yourself in that serene exaltation. After I saw her there on the steps, I came home and took out my violin, and all the stiffness and awkwardness that had been holding me back were suddenly gone. I played that afternoon for two straight hours, and I had never played like that before, never in all my——”

He stopped, stiffened, and released her hand, all because there was a faint click at the front door. A key turned in the lock. A little gust of damp wind entered from the hall, and with it came Mrs. Saltzman, small, sharp-eyed, neat, and pale, with a black silk kerchief on her head.

And that aerial structure of poesy and holiness that they had built between them—was it spurious or was it guilty that it should shamefully collapse at the entrance of an aging woman with a couple of brown paper bags in her hands? Why, if there was nothing between them, should the two of them pull apart and get awkwardly to their feet, she very white in the face and he very red? The sneer which I had suppressed at the beginning had its way with my face. There, now, I thought, she has caught him at it, the Jewish mamma has caught her dear son talking cozily with the *shicksa* in front of the fire, and damned if he isn't properly ashamed of himself.

I did not like the mother; I did not like the yellowish face, at once shrewd and suffering, with the sorrowful, discolored folds of flesh around the birdlike eyes; I did not like the cold mouth that looked as if it was waiting, holding its peace. What seemed like a long

time passed before that mouth pronounced the necessary, "How do you do?" and then Mrs. Saltzman walked up to me, lifted my patent leather purse, peered at the table to see whether I had done any damage to the finish, and laid the offending object in my lap, where it could do no harm to valuable things.

"How do you do? My name is Sophie Littman," I said.

"Ah, Sophie Littman." She looked at me and found in me no distinction to compensate for my carelessness.

"This is Alexandra Hill, Mother."

"Alexandra Hill." This time she gazed at greater length, with exactly the air of suspended judgment which a physician assumes when he is taking a pulse. Alexandra's eyes were the first to be lowered; she shifted uneasily and stared at the toes of her shoes.

"Well, Charlie," Mrs. Saltzman said, "have you practiced the Nocturne with Emmanuel yet? No? That's good. I want to hear how it sounds with the piano."

Charlie, halfway off the piano stool, nodded and smiled.

"How is your mother, Philip?"

"She's all right." It was his usual shy and scornful evasion of small talk. As I learned later, his mother was sick in bed with a cold on her chest.

"All right, enjoy yourselves. I'm going to put out the rolls and make some tea." She went back through the hall and into the kitchen, where we could hear her walking about and singing to herself. I was angry about the purse. I took it into the hall and hung it on the coat rack, making certain that the metal clip would

swing against the wallpaper. When I came back into the parlor, Alexandra was sitting prim and erect on one of the chairs, Philip had taken himself out of the perilous neighborhood of the potted plants, Charlie was making dog's ears on the pages of the score, and Emmanuel was tuning his violin, touching the tip of his bow deftly and lightly to the strings.

"I'm going to play an arrangement of the Chopin Nocturne in D flat, Sophie," he said.

The small noise ceased in the kitchen. He tucked the instrument beneath his ample chin and drew the bow; and all anger, all annoyance, all drabness fell away to give place to the sound.

I had never before heard the music of Chopin, and I was carried away on the broad, golden, open pinions of the melody, at once ardent and gentle, earthly and noble, soaring in exaltation and coming down again in resignation tinged with regret. Somehow in music that high, self-deceiving flight was less embarrassing than in those dissolving lines of poetry like "Joy with finger ever at his lips, bidding Adieu." Somehow *he* was less distressing, making passionate sweeps with his round right arm, than *she* was when she reeled off "Darkling I listen, and for many a time I have been half in love with easeful death. . . ." He was playing now on two strings at the same time, a new melody, a yearning, pleading melody. I closed my eyes and saw a white bird flying. I opened them and saw Alexandra's face. It was like the music, brooding and tender. The bony cheeks were wet with copious and easy tears. Oh, for God's sake, I thought, sensing that

Mrs. Saltzman had come back and was standing behind me, she ought not to look like that, she ought not to show a roomful of people that naked, defenseless face. The soaring was over; the motion was downward now. Then for an exquisite moment it lifted, sailed away, and vanished into a stretch of cool light blue. He let his bow down slowly, and he and Alexandra looked straight at each other. He sighed and stuck out his underlip in an uneasy but companionable signal of gratefulness, and she pulled the back of her hand across her cheeks, and sniffed and smiled.

"I hate double stops, they hurt my ears," said Philip.

"It's very hard to play double stops, you understand?" It was Mrs. Saltzman's voice, and I did not dare to turn and look. She sounded angry, and I was not at all sure that the source of her anger was Philip's auditory difficulty. Had she stood there on the threshold, waiting for a customary look? Had Emmanuel betrayed and humiliated her by seeking after another pair of eyes?

"I'll say one thing, he's the only one at school who can play double stops like that," said Charlie Pryor in a conciliatory tone.

"At school? School is nothing. He shouldn't be satisfied until he plays double stops like Mischa Elman."

"Oh, he plays beautifully, beautifully," Alexandra said.

Mrs. Saltzman, with a plate of sugar rolls in one hand and a table cloth in the other, moved into the range of my vision then. I stood up and helped her spread the cloth. Alexandra rose too, and stepped back-

ward in order to get out of the way—she was plainly upset, and she came so close to the Reznor stove that I wondered whether she had burned herself. Mrs. Saltzman walked slowly around the table, pulling at the cloth, until her back was to Alexandra, until she had isolated Alexandra from the rest of us. Then she said to my young man, in Yiddish, “Tell me, what is she, a Gentile?”

Philip flushed, and I could tell from Alexandra’s face that she had picked up enough Yiddish at my house to understand that. “Yes, Mrs. Saltzman, I’m a *shicksa*,” she said.

Strangely enough, I was less conscious of the miserable embarrassment of the moment than of the fact that Alexandra looked tall. She was standing, rather like a boy, between the stove and the table, her hands clasped behind her, her feet slightly apart. Her face was lifted, so that her hair fell backward from it, showing the clean line of her temple, her cheek, and her throat. Something stirred in me, and later I knew that I had indulged myself in the foolish thought that she might not look ridiculous on a stage after all.

“You think it’s an insult to call a person a *shicksa*?” said Mrs. Saltzman. “It’s not an insult. A *shicksa* is nothing but a Christian girl.”

“I wouldn’t say that Sophie or Philip or Emmanuel was a Jew.” The voice was clear, but tremulous.

“Don’t forget, young lady, Emmanuel *is* a Jew. Anyhow it’s different when you say ‘*shicksa*’ and when you say ‘Jew.’”

“Why?”

"Because in this world you can't be insulted when you belong to the majority. It's not the same when you belong to the minority. I tell you, when people hate you—"

"I never hated anybody."

"No? Maybe not yet."

"I never hated anybody, and I never will."

Philip walked up to the table and took a cinnamon roll. "Oh, for God's sake," he said, stuffing it into his mouth, "this is the most ridiculous conversation I ever heard in my life."

"Ridiculous is right," said Emmanuel. He laid his violin in the case and banged the lid down.

Mrs. Saltzman retreated into the kitchen, and my baffled anger focused upon Emmanuel. His brief outburst, his petulant banging down of the lid of the violin case seemed weak and insufficient. And yet I could not imagine what he should have said. Every fine phrase that I manufactured for him in that sickening silence—broken only by Charlie's desultory and tentative playing—every fragment of oratory that I would have put into his mouth would plainly have doubled the violence of the scene, would only have brought further insults down on Alexandra's head. Philip, Alexandra, Emmanuel, and I stared mutely at the carpet. The drab, cold room, the blank windowpanes, the smell of cooking, the thought of drinking grudging tea—they all lay on my stomach like indigestible food. Then, suddenly and impulsively, Emmanuel walked over to the Reznor and touched Alexandra's limp hand. "Don't mind. Please don't mind her," he said.

"She's right. She doesn't know me. How can she trust a Christian? I don't mind at all, really."

Charlie Pryor played the first phrase of the Chopin over again. I wished that he wouldn't. How—out of such shame and misery—could a white bird take flight? "It's late, Alexandra," I said. "Maybe we ought to go home."

"Oh, no, there's time for us to have our tea."

We had our tea, talking just such talk as she had wanted when she was never going to show him her heart again, so help her God. Chopin and Bach, Keats and Milton, Miss Dunovan and Dr. Dysart, Romanticism and Evolution. I thought that, afterward, in the gray street, she would release whatever was closed within her—for the first time, I could not name it—perhaps it was rage, perhaps pain. But even when Philip and Charlie Pryor left us at the car stop, she kept it to herself.

"I think Mrs. Saltzman is a very nasty woman," I said, looking down the street for the trolley. "She was rude about my handbag, too. My mother would never take anybody's handbag off our table, which is just as good as *her* table any day."

She did not reply.

"I don't know what makes her be the way she is."

"I do."

"Well, what?"

"This world. This awful world."

And now that the right to talk was thrice interdicted—an offense against Helene, an offense against Paul

Zoldi, an offense publicly exposed by those persecuted, widowed, maternal eyes—now that it was disobedient as well as unholy to talk in the locker room, in the corridors, on the steps near the bulletin board in the February dusk, they found that the only living moments of the dead day were the moments when they could talk to each other. She never walked home from school with me anymore. Every afternoon, as the hands of the clock in Miss Dunovan's room moved round toward half past three, Alexandra lost her enthusiam for Tennyson and Browning, lost the place, forgot to turn the page, sat tense on the edge of her chair like an animal held back by invisible but painful strings, plainly straining toward flight. "Good-by, Sophie darling, I'll see you this evening," she would say before the bell had stopped jangling, wringing her hands as if this were an eternal farewell. Then she would run down the hall, her pleated skirt flapping around her knees, toward the plaster St. George where Emmanuel waited—with what hoarded words trembling on his ripe young lips, with what questionable longings and carefully constructed compromises in his head?

Everybody in school began to say that she and Emmanuel were in love. I told her so in hope of forcing her to commit herself, but I mentioned the matter casually and on the hypocritical grounds that I thought she ought to know. She looked at me with dark, wounded eyes. In love, Sophie? Yes, that was just the sort of thing that one could expect from the gross, uncomprehending world. Others would never believe her, but surely I could understand—the complete detachment

of their minds from their bodies, the communication of their disembodied spirits. Certainly she and Emmanuel needed to see each other. Yes, that need grew more urgent with the weeks—it was a high and holy need which she could not and would not deny. They had found a new and exalted kind of friendship, such as few people can hope to experience. But love, Sophie? How could I be so misled? Not love, not love. . . .

It was not love, then, it was something else that sent them on longer and longer wanderings. They crossed the bridge which led from the Museum to the Park; they loitered at the end of that bridge, aware of the hour and the lengthening shadows; they leaned against the crouching stone panther there and talked through half the supper hour of God and friendship, life and art. If, afterward, each of them had to pay for the lingering, she eating cold pork chops alone in the kitchen and he unable to eat much of anything because of the invective—— Who but a little whore would stand talking to a man in the street? When did he intend to practice? Only a fool would work her hands to the bone, sewing and ironing for other people, in order to give such an ungrateful son his music lessons!—if they had to pay, and he dearly, it was all right. Next day they wandered again, and did not perceive that they had walked past the panther, scarcely knew how far they had come until they found themselves in the Botanical Conservatory, drugged with the dank sweetness of azalea and mimosa, rank root and red earth and crumbling leaf mold.

"How is it," she asked him, "that things can rot and smell so sweet?"

And, before the question was out of her mouth, she was stricken with a terrible conviction of mortality—goes, goes, oh Jesus, gentle Jesus, everything goes. This white exotic flower hanging on this furry stem, look, the petals were already creased and spotted with death. This neck of hers, this cheek moist in the sudden warmth—that these should be and then utterly not be. His hand—his soft, strong, music-making hand—his face, oh, his dear face. . . . She tried to envision the Cross of Christ towering over the sepulchers. "‘Though worms eat my body,’" she said aloud, "‘yet will I see God.’" But she could not see the Crucifix; she could see nothing but the wormlike roots, the black dust of last April's leaves, the rotting flower. "Oh, Emmanuel," she told him, weeping, "it's all right that I should die, but I can't bear it that you should ever be dead." And he—what could he do, with her sobbing and sniffing there in front of him—what could he do but clasp her round the back and move his cheek against her head?

After that, they grew more circumspect. Even in moments of transport or earnestness, they gave up touching hands. Only when they left each other after those walks or at the end of the parties we were having those days—sometimes at my house and sometimes in Alexandra's parlor among the cretonne curtains and the china dogs and cats—only on leave-taking did they permit themselves the luxury of touch, and even then they shook hands briskly, like two boys, standing far apart.

It was mid-March before they wandered as far as that little clearing in the Park. I have not seen the place these fifteen years. Unfortunately, it is only in our youth that our lives are moored to the landmarks of the Commonwealth—the Civil War cannons, the monuments to native poets, the stone panthers and the public benches, the spring-water fountains whose rims are worn smooth by God knows how many hands. Later, we kiss and quarrel and weep behind our private doors; for the mature, our cities have no shrines. It was a charming little clearing rimmed all around with slender silver birches. There was thick grass, there was a bench, and between the stripped and delicate boughs, there was a glimpse of flat gray lake—evoking in a landlocked region fantastic visions of the open sea. They came there on what Wordsworth called “the first mild day of March,” a day of softening earth and warmer sun. Icicles fell tinkling from the rocky ridge; there was a high music of trickling water and shattering ice; and whoever walked the pebbled path against the tide of melted snow seemed to be walking on a rippling flow of light.

Or so, at least, she said when she told me about that afternoon. Maybe the place was not half so fresh and radiant as she wanted it to be; maybe she forgot the damp newspaper lying on the bench; maybe she distilled from the feeble rays of fog-dimmed light the very essence of sun. It was not that she lied, or even exaggerated, about such things; it was only that, in every significant moment of her life, she sounded the heights and the depths before she found her bearings

on the world. The rooms, the streets, the fields where she suffered or rejoiced were always dark with the rising smoke of hell, or washed in the clean light of heaven.

They had been talking with the usual fervor all the way. The subject of their discourse was the real and the unreal, how only now and then we catch through the veil of sense a transitory glimpse of the eternal verities. By the time they had reached the middle of the clearing, their spirits had, according to Alexandra, been lifted up out of their bodies. And then—how could she describe it?—something happened in the upper air, an accidental brushing of wings, a stumbling of swift feet. And they were on earth again, the soles of their shoes sinking into the yielding ground, their cheeks pressed close, their bodies closer still, so close that she could feel through her whole breast the pounding of his heart.

It wasn't love. He told her so even while he fumbled with the pearl buttons. And she agreed, standing passive under his touch and nodding her head. Love was something else, something other and better than his hand and the moist March air on her bosom. Love was exaltation and Paul Zoldi and Helene. Whatever was passing between them now had nothing to do with the eternal verities, was accomplished in the cloudy realm of the flesh, was shut out utterly from the divine. And yet, sinful as she was, she was not in the least frightened. His hands were good, his cool round cheek was good, she loved the smell of his hair and the smell of his tweed topcoat, she could have gone on kissing him until the middle of the night. He was the first to step

back—and she was either shameless enough or honest enough to tell me so.

It was only on the way home through the darkening Park that she grew sorrowful with the thought of crime and punishment. Infants nursed at the breast; for the first time, her bosom had been touched; wasn't it possible that so all-pervading and disintegrating a touch as his might be capable of actual generation? She saw herself walking about in the respectable gray house, hidden behind drawn green blinds from the neighbors, robbed of all hope of ever playing Portia or Desdemona, ugly, ridiculous, heavy with child. And he was amazed and disquieted by her innocence. He had never really embraced a woman, but at least he knew. If she was such a baby as that—what had he done? Good God!

During the spring and the succeeding summer, I saw Alexandra continually, but we seldom had time for solitary talks with each other. Our lives were swift and many-stranded now; and if we looked back with nostalgia at our tenth and eleventh years—if we paid a few sad, wordless visits to the “consecrated chickens” and the bridge above the railroad tracks—we knew that we had fallen into a lyrical way of deceiving ourselves. For my part, I was reasonably content. If things were not perfect, they were at least a great deal better than I had ever dreamed they would be. If we were still left behind by the golden girls and lads who drove off to dance in night clubs among willows and pines, if our dresses were still taken from racks marked “Greatly Reduced,” if we had not yet learned how to redden

our lips and fluff out our hair, we were not at any rate utterly lost. In spite of our poverty and plainness, we had what we referred to as "a social life of our own."

True, it was a rather precarious social life. We knew that our claims were conditional, that the picnic in the Park might be called off at the last minute because Philip had been mesmerized by a trigonometry problem or Emmanuel had been stricken with fierce remorse over his lonely mother or his neglected violin. We had good reason to feel a stab of conscience when we took a handful of change from one of our mothers; anything—a new recording to be heard at somebody else's house, a brief, mysterious glance from Helene, the mere delight of solitary communion with Whitehead or Aldous Huxley—anything might change their plans, might leave us desolate and transform our party supplies into an awful waste and a crying shame. Perhaps it was this risk that taught us to widen our circle a bit, to bring in Charlie Pryor, who arrived with deferential punctiliousness at exactly eight, to invite Andrea Viccini, a hard, vigorous, masculine young woman who was enthusiastic about socialism and biology, to risk boring the boys with Ruth Peterson, a pale, limp little thing who wanted to be an archaeologist. And, before we knew it, those evenings of ours had attained a certain notability. By the beginning of summer, people whom we had barely known before were seeking us out—clever, aggressive, opinionated people whose tongues were too sharp for the average living room, and shy, tender, colorless people who wanted only to sit still and listen. They filled up our chairs and our sofas;

they sat on our rugs and the steps in our halls; they helped us in the kitchen and overflowed onto our porches and gazed at the moon with us on summer nights.

No doubt time has transmuted that first fellowship. It could not have been what I think it was when I remember it now. The ten or twelve of us sitting around Mrs. Hill's dining room table—we were at best an inelegant lot, and yet how beautiful we seem in recollection, how beautiful in the light of the four candles, over the bouquets of jonquils and button chrysanthemums. Those were the years when there was a little money, money enough at least for flowers and candles and all such cheap, sweet, perishable things. Money was flowing in a thick, rich tide over the top of the world; and it trickled downward until a few loose coins fell even on our miserable heads. Money was buying snow-white yachts and stately houses, summers in Switzerland and winters in Rome, banks and transport lines and factories. My mother had money to paper our apartment, and Alexandra's mother bought a washing machine. As for the two of us—we were rolling in luxury. Out of the jingling tide that swept over the nation through the golden years, we snatched our first long dresses and high-heeled slippers, a dozen books and record albums, two bottles of perfume, and a couple of satin petticoats edged in lace.

And, like the improvident poor that we were, we ate up half our fortunes, squandered our wealth on iced tea and jelly doughnuts, Swiss cheese and coffee cake, baked ham and strawberry tarts. We sat like queens, dispensing inexhaustible hospitality from both ends of

the table, I in my beige chiffon and she in her pale blue silk complete with a bunch of felt forget-me-nots. Did she really possess, for that brief period, a new and potent beauty? Was her skin cool and exquisite above the silk, or was it only the candlelight? Among those grateful visitors who made a cult of admiring her, she did attain a whole series of loose little womanly ways—looked slantwise through her dark lashes, let her head loll on Emmanuel's shoulder, thrust out the small tip of her tongue, smiled at us secretly, with closed lips. Sometimes when we were very merry and she was not afraid of Philip and Emmanuel, she would begin to sing in her clear, reedy voice, to Charlie Pryor's accompaniment, Swedish songs that had been introduced to us by Ruth Peterson:

“Oh, how good it is to be here,
Good to be alive today!
See how fresh and green the grass is,
Hear the birds pour forth their lay.”

Or she would whirl round and round the parlor, holding her skirt wide, like a pair of wings, stooping to kiss the top of somebody's head, and singing all the while how

“A butterfly at Haga
In a frosty mist was seen,
Where it sought a flowery parlor
There to make its nest of green.”

Back in those days she enjoyed herself more fervently

than I did. I merely smelled the bucketful of lilacs that Mr. Hill brought from the country, but she buried her face in them, embraced them, breathed them until she was exhausted, drugged, starry-eyed. When the crowd of us walked through the Park after the free organ recitals on Saturday nights, I sang snatches of the music to myself; she danced ten steps ahead of the rest of us, leaped up to catch a dangling moonlit leaf, and, quite unexplainably, thrust it into her breast. *Tristan and Isolde*, heard from the second balcony on a wan spring afternoon, left me puzzled and tired; she moved like a sleepwalker through the thin mist and the faint sunlight, failed to notice Dr. Dysart's kindly greeting, had not a word to say all the way home. And when Miss Dunovan gave us four tickets to *Hamlet*—a surprisingly fine production presented as the crown of the year by the drama department of the College of Fine Arts—I thought she would die of it; her hands kept working and her face was white as a sheet. I was constantly perplexed by the excessiveness of her delight. Did she really have a heart larger and wilder than my own? Or did she enjoy things with such violence because she needed a recompense for some obscure suffering? She was forever quoting the Shakespeare sonnet which ends with, "To love that well which thou must lose e'er long."

What was it that she was afraid to "lose e'er long"? Two things: her faith—her dear Lord Jesus—that and Emmanuel.

I am sure that there was not one in our little company who, if he had given the matter due consideration,

would have wanted to drag Alexandra away from the foot of the Cross. But faith was wholly foreign to the rest of us. How could I, with my new-found knowledge of the process of generation, keep from sneering at the notion of an Immaculate Conception? How could Emmanuel reduce the ecstasies of the last Beethoven quartets to the measurements of the Lutheran Prayer Book? How could Philip know what he was doing when he announced that Copernicus had once and for all swept God clean out of the heavens? How could Ruth Peterson resist the temptation to speak of other gods buried under the dust of fallen cities, or Andrea Viccini refrain from saying that all religion is the opiate of the poor?

I ease my conscience these days by thinking that such talk alone would not have been strong enough to loose her clinging hands. There were other forces at work against her desperate hold: There was the sickening moment in the Botanical Conservatory, when, among the leaf mold and the worm-shaped roots, she had seen the very face of death. There was the natural, unavoidable magic of the flesh itself, the sudden realization that, though the flesh is sinful, the flesh is certainly sweet. There was Reverend Kindler's prudishness, and there was the term paper which she wrote on Zoroastrianism.

When most of us were writing our term papers about Mr. Ford, Mussolini, Yellow Fever, German Hostels, and Adult Education in Denmark, what put Zoroaster into Alexandra's head? During a lesson in ancient history, Mr. Elliot had chanced to remark that the Magi were learned priests among the ancient Persians,

apostles of a certain Zoroaster, a philosopher and mystic whose very dates were obscure, he had lived so long ago. "Were they the same Magi who went to Bethlehem?" she asked him after class. He rubbed his chin and told her, "Perhaps. Yes, very probably so." She had a print of the Benozzo Gozzoli Magi, bearded, intense, austere even in their robes stiff with jewels and gold. And thereafter nothing would do but that she should write her paper about these first of the sophisticates to grow humble at the sight of the Star, these wise men who had come—as we in our lesser wisdom would not come—to kneel at the feet of an incarnate God.

That spring we spent many evenings working together in the reference room of the Public Library. She read furiously, feverishly, rubbing her cheeks and eyes, biting her knuckles and her fingertips, doing fierce and impatient things to her hair. Sometimes she stopped and pushed the book aside as if she had scented poison in it. Sometimes she bent brooding over the page as though she breathed a troubling, rich perfume. And afterward, when the bell announced the closing hour and we walked into the springtime street, she spoke of Zoroaster and of Christ; she involved me, all unwilling, in her awesome wrestling with doubt.

Zoroaster, she said, had explained to her something that all her careful reading of the Gospel had never explained; Zoroaster had given her an acceptable reason for the existence of evil in the world. He taught that there were two gods—the god of evil and the god of good—both joined in everlasting battle, with their field of action on the world. And Ahriman, the dark

one, the god of evil—Zoroaster had not locked him powerless in hell; often he triumphed, often he set his heel upon the face of Mazda, the god of light. Nor could she gainsay the plausibility of that interpretation of man's history, or find anything to gainsay it in her catechism. She had seen Ahriman, in the earthquakes in Japan, the fires that swept the tenements by night, the egg broken in the April storm, the dead rabbit and the idiot with the blank face. She had felt his presence in her blood, in her heart. Oh, no, nobody could tell her that evil was locked up in hell—evil was unquestionably rampant here on earth.

I asked her with some asperity what she meant to do. Become a Zoroastrian? Set up a couple of altars in her bedroom and burn incense to the god of darkness and the god of light? Go to Persia to see if there were any surviving accredited Magi who would initiate her into the ancient mysteries? Surely she didn't believe in that stuff?

Believe in Ahriman and Mazda? Oh, no, Sophie, certainly not. Really, they were only daemons used by a crafty class of Persian priests to keep the Persian people in line. Or, at best, they were somebody's feeble attempt to explain this unexplainable, awful world. No, she didn't believe in them at all.

Then what *did* she believe?

She said, pressing her cheeks and temples between her hands, she didn't know, she didn't know. . . .

On another occasion, past ten o'clock in the evening, on a bench in front of the Library, with the smell of lilacs and new-turned earth around us and the street

lamps as luscious with light as mid-summer fruit—on another occasion she spoke of Zoroaster once more, languidly, dreamily, stopping often to breathe the richness of the May night.

“You know, Sophie,” she said, “as far back as I can remember, I’ve been taught that the body is a shameful, wicked thing, I’ve been told that whatever we give to our bodies is wrong in the sight of God. And do you know what Zoroaster says?”

“Listen, Alexandra, if you don’t believe a word he says, why do you think about him so much?”

“I said I didn’t believe in Mazda and Ahriman. I never said I don’t believe a word he says. He says when we despise our bodies and turn away from food and wine and flowers and lovers, we’re committing a terrible sin, we’re throwing God’s best and kindest gifts right back in His face, we’re actually insulting God.”

That struck me as a fresh and remarkable idea. I toyed with it in the ensuing silence, wished I might do God a large favor by lying down in Philip’s arms under a lilac tree, considered doing Him a small one by buying a five-cent chocolate mint patty on the way home. Then, possibly because she leaned her head on the back of the bench and delivered herself of a long and tremulous sigh, I found that I did not like the idea in the least. Not, at any rate, insofar as it had any bearing on her relations with Emmanuel, and I strongly suspected that she was thinking of Emmanuel.

“Sophie. . . .” She laid her hand upon my knee. “Listen, if our flesh and our senses were really given to us to use and enjoy, don’t you think——”

I stood up and brushed my skirt where her hand had lain. I could not have been more terrified if she had tried to lay some creeping, deadly insect in my lap. My forehead was burning, and I could not look her in the eye. "I don't know anything at all about it," I said. "Why do you keep on asking me this and that about God when I've told you a thousand times I don't know anything at all about God? Why don't you go and ask somebody who knows?"

If she had offered me so brutal a slight, I would have marched straight for the streetcar stop without so much as saying good night. But she only sighed and said, "Whom should I ask? Who knows?" And all the anger, all the fright at unwanted responsibility flowed out of me, leaving me nothing but remorse and tenderness at her listless air and her hanging head.

I sought after easy remedies. "My cousin Bernard is very religious," I told her. "Whenever anything bothers him, he goes to see the rabbi. I'm sure I don't know why, but just talking to the rabbi seems to do him worlds of good."

"Does he go to see the rabbi just like that?"

"Maybe he hangs around after the service. No, he makes an appointment, I guess. I can't quite remember. I'll ask him if you want to know. Maybe you'd feel better if you went and talked to the minister at your church. Honestly, Alexandra, I'd talk to you about all these things forever if it would really do you any good, but it won't because I'm nobody to talk to, I just don't know."

She stood up then and slipped her arm through mine.

"I know you would, Sophie, I know you would," she said. "Anyhow, you did give me an excellent solution. It's strange that I've never thought of it myself. I'll go and talk it over with Reverend Kindler. I'll go tomorrow. I really should have gone to him weeks ago."

Her appointment with Reverend Kindler was duly arranged for the following Friday afternoon. There was just enough time for her to cover, at a breathless pace, the distance between the high school and the minister's house; and there was a remorseful look on her face when she passed the statue of St. George where she usually waited for Emmanuel. She had worn a black sweater to school, and the high neck and tight arm bands were soaked with the sweat of her sick anxiety. She was about as ugly as it was possible for her to be—her nose and cheekbones shone with sweat, and sweat gave an oily, bodiless lankness to her hair.

On the way home from school, I broke into a fit of nervous sweat myself. Lightning flashed above the green, unstirring tops of the trees, and thunder, subterranean and malevolent, seemed to be rumbling under my feet. On that solitary walk, I began to reproach myself with sins of neglect; I should have coached her, I should have told her to confine the discussion to Zoroaster, I should have warned her not to say a word about Emmanuel. And suddenly it seemed to me that what she had called my "excellent solution" was nothing short of preposterous. To send her into a preacher's sitting room, to tell her to go and confess, in her helplessness and her ugliness, to somebody whom I had

never seen and had no reason to take on trust—I was responsible for that, and that was either rank stupidity or downright cruelty. I looked apprehensively at the thickening, purplish clouds and hated my cousin Bernard for putting crazy notions into my head. When the storm broke—and I without an umbrella and four blocks from home—I had a sense of satisfaction. I was, at least, as unprepossessing, as scared, and as wretched as she must be, with my hair plastered to my forehead and all the virgin crispness of my new green linen gone.

I tried to reassure myself while I put on dry clothes and set the supper table: maybe the Reverend Kindler had been too busy to see her; maybe he had noticed her moist forehead and had pitied her; maybe he had listened with patience and been kind. But I knew—I knew so surely that I could scarcely swallow the Friday chicken—I knew that he had not been kind. How can a man be kind when you question everything that he means and is?

That Friday evening the party was to be at my house. The sky had cleared, and I opened all the windows and let the storm-freshened wind move in. Long after the others had settled themselves in the parlor, Alexandra still had not arrived, and when she came, she came with Emmanuel. I knew then that she had permitted herself a shameful indulgence which she had steadfastly renounced before—she had gone all the way up to his house on the hill, had waited outside for him to finish his practicing, had dared the threat of his mother's seeing her, all for the sake of walking down the hill with him alone.

She wore the same pale-blue silk. It was beginning to look a bit raggy now; the ribbon at the waist was soiled, and most of the felt forget-me-nots had lost their yellow eyes. Her face, quite dry and tight, had a peculiarly vivid look, and it was a long time before I made out that this vivacity was the result of rouge and lipstick. I wanted desperately to ask her about the afternoon's encounter, but there was no occasion for asking her anything.

All evening she was crazy and irresponsible. She teased Andrea Viccini about a certain swart, hairy, loud-mouthed Italian boy whose meretricious masculinity was so loathsome to us all that we did not dare to believe that Andrea could look at him without disgust. She said that the French song, "*Aupres de ma blonde*," made no sense at all if the last line was "*Il fait bon, fait bon*"—plainly the last line was "*Il fait bon dormir*." She pulled Charlie Pryor's ears, confused a poor newcomer by engaging him in an intentionally involved and meaningless argument, and showed not the slightest inclination to help me make the food. In fact, she didn't come into the kitchen until the last cream-cheese-and-olive sandwich was spread, and even then she sauntered over to the sinkboard with her arm through Emmanuel's.

"Honest to God, Alexandra, you've been acting just like a monkey tonight," I said, topping the sandwich plate with a sprig of parsley.

"I *am* a monkey. I hunt lice. Look." She made a simian face, held her fingers together so that she had a dangling, prehensile hand, and pretended that she was

picking lice out of Emmanuel's hair. He looked distinctly uncomfortable.

"I wish we'd had a couple of different kinds of stuffings for the sandwiches. Making thirty of them, all exactly the same, gets to be an awful bore," I said.

Her hand turned human, moved out, passed down my cheek in a tremulous caress. "I'm sorry, Sophie darling, I'm sorry in my guts. But I had such an entirely rotten afternoon that I thought I'd just be extraordinarily kind to myself."

Emmanuel was standing behind her now. She stepped backward, so that the length of her rested against the length of him, and he passed his arm around her waist and pressed his chin down on the top of her head. It was obvious that I was not going to have her to myself for an instant; so I asked her outright, in his presence, what Reverend Kindler had said.

"Words, words, words. Did you notice how fat I am this evening? Really, I'm awfully fat, because I'm all swollen up with the sin of pride. I have a lot of other sins, too—I forget most of them though because they flew out of his mouth so fast—the only other one I remember distinctly is lechery. There's something very memorable about a word like 'lechery'—I——"

I was furious—furious with myself that I should have sent her out to be shamed, furious with her that she should have acted upon my advice, furious that she should use that creeping insect-word before Emmanuel, furious that I should be fool enough to turn red in the face. I saw her through a blaze of rage, and thought

there was wantonness in her eyes; I hated her unblushing cheeks and her pert, smiling, painted lips.

"I thought," I said in my coldest tone, "that you went to see the minister in order to discuss *God*."

That spare, earthy body of hers—she pressed it, she deliberately pressed it against Emmanuel. "God and other matters," she said, closing her eyes.

I lifted the sandwich tray and started for the dining room. Then, on the threshold, I was stricken by the old remorse, the sense of a need unfulfilled, a bounty ungiven. I turned back. "Well, what about God, then?" I asked in a conciliatory voice.

"Oh, nothing. Not much, anyway. Only this: If I thought God was what Reverend Kindler thinks He is, I'd much rather think there wasn't any God."

I had no answer for that. I stood for a long time staring, not at her naked, asking face, but at her pale-blue silk. I never saw that dress again. There was still a little money in the Hill house, and she bought another in its place, a white organdy trimmed around the bottom of the skirt with four ruffles of black lace. When I asked her, weeks afterward, why she never wore the blue one any more, she told me with disturbing coolness that she had ruined it, had stained it on the bruised, wet grass "that night it rained, when I acted like a monkey, as you said." So they had wandered into the Park, the two of them, in the thick mist, under the melting moon, when the green season was past its first freshness and the best of the lilacs were dead. So her blue silk was ruined, and she no longer had need to talk of questionable things, was content to be silent now, with wonder

and wisdom and disappointment in her eyes. I assaulted her new reserve with an old question, and ached at the answer. No, Sophie, it wasn't love, it still wasn't love.

During that summer and the succeeding fall, she was constantly referring with naive surprise to a fact that she had known since that first afternoon when she and Emmanuel had stood talking in the corridor. Wasn't it amazing, she kept asking me, that Emmanuel would graduate this coming February, half a year before she would. Not that his graduation would interfere in the least with their extraordinary connection. He might be going away, yes; he might be going to Juilliard, provided they offered him a scholarship; but that was a vague possibility, not to be faced while summer lingered on, while the leaves still clung scarlet and yellow to the trees, while the chrysanthemums bloomed pink against the October dusk, while the blades of grass showed green through the first snow.

And even now that winter was here, there was really nothing to warrant distress. *If* he went away in February, he would be home again for Easter vacation. *If* he got the scholarship—and, much as she wished him well, those scholarships were hard to get—wouldn't she herself be staying here for only a little while? She meant to apply for a scholarship at the Drama League in New York. Oh, she knew what I thought of her talents, but I should just wait and see. No, her parents had nothing to give her to live on. She would have to make her own living somehow, but didn't thousands of girls up there manage to make a living? Think of the

pleasures of the metropolitan life—she and Emmanuel walking together down those famous avenues, eating their dinners in Chinese cellar restaurants. And a room of one's own, a door to lock at last, and no one to ask what's going on inside.

Then, all at once, all the pliable future hardened into the inflexible present. It was January, bald January with gray slush and rain, and he had been granted his scholarship. He was going away, and the date of his going was a black, ineluctable "29" on the face of the calendar. He would get on a train—no, she could not go to the station to say good-by to him because that would offend his mother—but at such-and-such an hour she would sit up in bed and know that he was gone. Now all the minor consolations showed themselves for what they were: poor, feeble self-deceptions. How could he come back to walk with her through the Park this spring? Where would he find the money for the trip? His mother had to borrow enough to cover his dormitory fees. As for the Drama League, that was a dream. She had nothing, nothing, not even the railroad fare.

The one available anodyne for her wretchedness was something which I considered a poison brew. Miss Dunovan had mentioned that tryouts for the senior play would begin on the fifth of February. The play would be *As You Like It*, and any female member of the class, standing taller than five feet five and weighing less than one hundred and twenty pounds, might read for the role of Rosalind. Of course *she'll* read for it, I told myself. She'll take down her battered Shake-

speare and agonize over the lines. She'll put on a pair of pants and walk around in the woods, and then she'll read in that awful passionate voice and make a perfect jackass of herself. All to no purpose—she didn't stand a chance. Half the girls in the class were better to look at than she. And the thought of that double blow—his going and her disgrace—was so disquieting to me that I lost my appetite.

Yet, when I considered the matter sanely, it seemed to me that she was singularly disinterested in the tryouts. On the few occasions when we talked of them, she referred to them with an abstracted and complaining air, much as a sick person might remark that at a certain hour of the day somebody would bring him unwanted toast and tea. She was taking the tryouts for granted, and I could not or did not dare decide whether it was success or failure that had become a foregone conclusion in her head. Maybe she thought she could carry off the part without half trying, and maybe she was so convinced of the certainty of defeat that she did not mean to try at all.

Certainly, in those last weeks of January, she did not take the *Complete Shakespeare* down from the hanging shelf beside her bed. Her waking hours were filled with two occupations: being with Emmanuel and waiting to be with Emmanuel. In the foul weather, young love had retreated from the Park to the Museum; the querulous, wizened guards who usually sat solitary among the plaster deities were harassed by restless pairs who leaned against the Phidian arms and breasts and retreated behind baptismal founts and horses' heads to

kiss. So far as I could judge in the few feverish moments she spent on me, she thought only about their next meeting in that mortuary place—that and the letters which were to pass at weekly intervals between her and Emmanuel. For now the letters had taken the place of all the bright, spurious possibilities. In their letters they would become again what they had been in the paradisiacal innocence of their first weeks together. Physical separation would only restore that early and unworldly companionship which had proved itself better than love.

I could not, of course, put any trust in these prospective ecstasies. He who goes forth on a high adventure is seldom bereaved—bereavement is the portion of those who stay behind. I had noticed a suppressed excitement in all of Emmanuel's movements, an inability to pay complete attention to what was going on around him. I did not blame him. Nobody but a fool would expect a young man to cling desperately to the past when he was about to walk toward the unknown rooms and faces of a new world. I did not think it likely that he would write many radiant epistles, and yet I could not bring myself to smother her hopes in pessimism. Those hopes seemed useful; they distracted her mind from the business of reading for Rosalind, and they postponed for an indefinite period the moment when she must resign herself to loss. I was afraid for her those days as I had never been afraid for anybody before, and I think I might even have helped her to deceive herself if fate and Mrs. Saltzman had not made all of us stare into the stony face of truth that last Saturday night.

It was only natural that Mrs. Saltzman should want as much of her son's company as possible during his final week end in the city. It was even gracious that she should be willing to share him with his friends, should let him ask us all to come at eight o'clock for a last performance of the Kreutzer Sonata, a last round of rolls and tea. Yet I had a distinct sensation of foreboding. Andrea Viccini was the first to desert before the undefined threat. She declined on the grounds that her mother would be coming home with the seventh of the young Viccinis on Sunday afternoon. The house was a pigsty, nobody had washed a dish since last Monday, the garbage would have to be carried out before the madonna and child moved in, she said. Ruth Peterson invented a headache, and I could not tell whether the pain that pounded at the back of my particular cranium was imaginary or actual. My mother said that my cheek felt hot when she kissed me at the door. Perhaps it was fever, and perhaps it was apprehension; but, even if it turned out to be fever, I did not intend that Alexandra should go over there alone.

The rain had stopped at supper time, but the ground was covered with slush, and the fog was so thick that it made your eyes ache and left a tar-flavored coating on your tongue. I felt unaccountably cold. Everybody else said that the weather had turned very warm, but I was so cold that I had to stop at a drugstore on the way and spend a nickel for a cup of tea. The tea tasted like fog, and all the people in the drugstore had purplish rings around their eyes, and the hanging lights looked swollen and darkly bright. There, for the first time, I

experienced a feeling which has come upon me often since: a nauseating distaste for mankind, for dirty nostrils and phlegm-choked voices and wide, shiny lips. I walked into that chill, inhospitable house expecting to find God knows what. I found only Charlie Pryor sitting at the piano and Philip close to the potted plants and Alexandra and Emmanuel kneeling before the Reznor stove, talking quietly to each other. And—perhaps because she wore that same dark dress with the big pearl buttons and had taken the lipstick off her mouth—I had so giddy a sense of time moving in reverse that I could not make myself pleasant to anybody, could only sit on a hard chair and shiver and sigh.

“Where’s your mother, Emmanuel?” Charlie Pryor said.

“She’s gone to pick up the sugar rolls. She’ll be back pretty soon now, I guess.”

By ten o’clock I was very dim indeed. Every light I saw seemed to be enlarged in the heavy air, and every sound I heard seemed to be muffled in mist. The self-conscious and desultory talk, Mrs. Saltzman’s comings and goings between the parlor and the kitchen, the music, Alexandra’s strained, white-faced weariness, and Emmanuel’s evident restlessness—I remember them now as things that must have existed, but not as things that I heard with my own ears or saw with my own eyes. The damp, fibrous veil around me was torn only when I saw that Alexandra was no longer in front of the Reznor with Emmanuel. Where was she, then? I started up from the table and made a solitary journey to the kitchen, recalling with something close to horror

on the way that Mrs. Saltzman was also missing from the company. And in the kitchen—I saw that kitchen and its glaring, unshielded light-bulb with a painful clarity—Alexandra and Mrs. Saltzman were standing, one on each side of a work table, both white and open-mouthed, each staring into the other's face.

A bread knife was lying on the table between them. Its blade shone in the harsh brightness, and, in my wild and feverish state, I had visions of murder and ritualistic sacrifice. I raised my hand to my mouth, and Mrs. Saltzman saw me. "If you want to come in, come in," she said in a shaking voice. "What I'm saying to her everybody knows already. Maybe you better hear it, too."

"Don't say anything to her," I said. "Let her alone."

"That's a nice way for a little snot from high school to talk to an older woman." The dark bird's eyes flashed upon me, keen as the knife, keen as the wounding light. "But maybe you're right. Why should I bother myself to tell her anything? If she wants to throw herself away for nothing, that's her business. Why should I care if she ruins herself? All I tell her now is, Don't hold on to him anymore, don't cry to him in letters, don't bother him. He shouldn't have started it in the first place, and now I'm glad he's finished. Let him be finished, let him alone."

I opened my mouth to protest again, but Alexandra shook her head. She was standing straight and utterly still, with her fingers clasped behind her. "How can I let him alone?" she asked in the flat, scared voice of a

child. "I care so much for him, and I think he cares for me, and——"

"Cares for you? Listen, young lady, I'll tell you how much he cares for you. He cares for you as much as any young boy cares for any no-good girl who gives herself away for nothing. Today he cares for you. Why not? It doesn't cost him anything, you wait for him in the street, you hang around his neck. But tomorrow, thank God, he'll be in New York, and he'll forget all about you."

"No, oh, no, you're wrong, he couldn't forget."

"He'll have more important things to think about—his violin, and I want him to meet people who can do him some good. What kind of people do you come from? Your father is a common workingman and your mother is a simple woman with no education and they never saved a cent to send you to college. You think you'll make something of yourself, you think you'll be an actress, but let me tell you, you'll be an actress like I will. Some day when I'm dead I hope Emmanuel meets a nice girl, a nice Jewish girl from a good family. Any *shicksa* is bad enough, but a *shicksa* like you—a plain, ugly *shicksa* without even a good shape. . . ."

Her voice, her words seemed to be hitting me hard on the back of my head. I was all mixed up, and when her shouting stopped I could not understand why the pain did not stop too. Then, in the roaring stillness, I saw that I had to talk. Alexandra looked ghastly. Alexandra looked exactly as if something vital had crumpled up behind her face. Alexandra, I thought, has died inside, and somebody has to answer Reverend Kindler

and Mrs. Saltzman in Alexandra's name, because she is so skinny and ugly and so sorry about dead rabbits and can give all those speeches out of *Antony and Cleopatra* and can't say a word, not one goddamned word for herself.

"Mrs. Saltzman, you shouldn't talk to anybody like that," I said.

"If I talk to her, I talk to her for her own good."

"You shouldn't talk to her like that."

"I've got to think about Emmanuel."

"You think too damn much about Emmanuel. Anyhow, what makes you so sure he's going to be a Mischa Elman? Right now, he's no more Mischa Elman than Alexandra is Helen Hayes——"

"A fine Helen Hayes she'll be!"

She had driven me to the edge of the water, and I leaped straight in. "Some day she'll be a great actress," I shouted at the top of my voice. "Some day you'll be sorry you said she was ugly and indecent. Some day you'll be damned sorry, you'll see, you'll see. . . ." Then the pain was so bad that I sat on the edge of the table and could not cope with the face that had suddenly appeared in the doorway, could only clasp my hands at the back of my head.

"God damn you," said Emmanuel, stepping over the threshold. "You had to do it, didn't you? You couldn't wait. You couldn't keep your mouth shut one more night."

The woman laughed, deep in her throat, and by that laugh she turned him into an infant. She was finished with talk—she told him off with her eyes. Oh, it made

her laugh, his being violent—he, with his soft, warm hands and his round, mild face. To her he was a genius, a little pink baby, a fool who didn't know what was good for himself. But a man? Not he, not while she kept herself above ground, and certainly not tonight. She shrugged and walked away, past him and me. And when the stillness was broken, it was broken by her distant voice, saying to Philip and Charlie that maybe I'd better go home, I looked pretty sick, and I talked as if I was out of my head. . . .

"*Are* you sick, Sophie?" Alexandra asked in a faint, flat voice.

I had no time to answer, because he said her name. He said it as I had never heard him say anything else—from the very core of his being. It came out of him shaken by remorse and by the first actual sense of loss.

She turned and embraced him, and I could not take my eyes from that embrace. She clung to him the way a terrified cat clings to the high, wind-blown branch of a tree, clutching with bony hands at his back, pressing her chin into his shoulder, staring beyond him in frozen fright.

"Listen, Alexandra, listen, darling. . . ."

She waited, tense with the need unfulfilled, the bounty ungiven. Then she sighed and closed her eyes. Her hands went up, passed over his hair and his cheeks, touched the plump rounds of his arms, and fell at her sides. "*You are* sick, Sophie," she said in the same toneless voice. "I'll take you home. Will you please get our coats and stuff for us, Emmanuel?"

With the cottony fog around my head and the pain

thumping inside, I was in no state to appreciate a show of gallantry; I was moved only to a vague surprise when Philip said he'd take us where we were going, since it was pretty obvious that neither of us was fit to go anywhere alone. I cannot remember any discussion about our taking a taxicab. All I remember is being in a cab and feeling pretty ghastly about it, since the only other taxi I had ever taken had carried me to see my Grandfather Goldspinner in his coffin. Philip whistled, and I wished that he wouldn't because it hurt my head. Alexandra held my hand, and I wished that she wouldn't because her fingers were like ice and I was deathly cold. When I pulled away from her, she leaned against the window and cried. "Oh, my Jesus," she whispered, "oh, my poor, beautiful Jesus. Oh, Emmanuel, Emmanuel. . . ." Philip was so embarrassed that he kept on whistling the second theme of the first movement of the Eighth Symphony. The telegraph poles went by like mourners, and the street lights rolled around like crazy eyes. It'll be better in the house, I thought. In the house, in bed, I'll stop being cold.

But nothing warmed me, not the tea with whisky and lemon, not the hot water bottle, not the quilts and blankets and coats that my father heaped on top of me until I could scarcely draw a breath. While I lay there like that, something fell down past the black window-pane. It was a cat falling out of a tree. It landed on our pavement, at the foot of our back steps, and afterward, almost shapeless and half-dead, it kept making a horrible, moaning sound. "Oh, don't Sophie, don't Sophie," my little brother said, coming in and sitting on my bed.

And I knew by his face that the horrible sounds were my own.

Now that I have made myself remember in detail all the incidents which preceded my thoroughgoing case of pneumonia, I ask myself whether I was a passive, innocent body upon which a germ happened to light, or whether I didn't go out with open arms to meet the germ myself. Certainly there was something suspect about the timing of my illness: I could not endure the sight of January 29 and February 5 on the kitchen calendar, and I arranged matters so that, for me, those days were lost. My escape into the world of delirium was, of course, only a passage from one sort of pain to another. The dying cat was brought up from the foot of the back steps and laid on my chest, where it interfered terribly with my breathing. Mrs. Saltzman cut up a dead rabbit with a bread knife, Miss Dunovan set a Rosalind cap with a scarlet feather on Helene Blauvelt's head, and Philip stood at the foot of my coffin, whistling a foolish, nagging flute-theme from the *Coq d'Or*. Yet, dreadful as these nightmares were, they had the virtue of being unforeseen. I did not have to sit in the fore-known seat in Civics III the morning after Emmanuel's going. I did not have to see the expected look of bereavement on Alexandra's face. I did not have to walk down the hall with her after the tryouts, or wait at St. George's plaster feet to hear her say the predestined sentence: Just as you thought, Sophie, I'm not going to be Rosalind.

For two or three days after I had begun to recover,

I moved between actual sleep and a kind of waking sleep, a dim hypnotic state in which I was able, almost, to convince myself that there was no world beyond the threshold of my room, no time beyond the date when I would be permitted to sit up and have a lamb chop with my toast and tea. They could not trick me into asking who had been holding whispered conversation at the front door; they could not force me to open the notes and cards that lay in a growing heap on the table by my bed. When they said that Miss Dunovan had called three times to see how I was getting on, I merely said, "That's nice." When they added that Alexandra had come twice today and would drop in again tonight, I turned my face to the wall and sank into profound sleep. Someday I would be able to listen to her tell exactly how she felt when she knew that his train was moving out of the station. Someday I would be able to walk with her past whatever fair and self-possessed young woman had been chosen to play Rosalind. But now I needed time. . . .

Then it was afternoon, and there was sunlight on the flowered quilt, and I was coming up, very slowly, out of a pool of sleep.

"Sophie," said my mother, standing at the door with a no-more-nonsense look on her face. "You wake up now and say hello to Alexandra. She's sitting in the living room. I told her to wait."

I turned my face against the wall and sighed.

"She was here yesterday and the day before, and she's got something to tell you."

"Ah, Ma, can't you see I'm trying to sleep?"

"She brought something nice for you, Sophie. She brought you a rose."

I was trapped. I couldn't tell her to bring the rose back tomorrow—tomorrow it would be dead. And suddenly a springtime yearning, a longing for her, for Philip, and for the windy streets, swept over me like a tide. I meant to draw a deep breath, but I sobbed instead. Weak, effortless tears spilled over my face.

"Somebody else came along with her to see you."

I sat up and dashed the tears away with the back of my hand. "Philip? Not Philip?" I said.

"Yes, Philip. Both of them are sitting in the living room. You wait a minute. I'll tell them they should come in."

Alexandra was the first to step across the threshold. The instant I laid eyes on her, I stopped being afraid. She looked thinner than ever in her soft white shirt, open at the throat; she had been worn down to the bone again by loss and disgrace and worry over me. But her hair had a silky sheen, and her eyes looked sane and clear, and there was something in her bearing that reminded me of a long-forgotten Friday evening—I should have remembered that she knew how it was to rise from the dead. She came over to the bed and bent down to kiss me, and there was a wholesome scent about her—smell of the tea rose that she held in her hand, smell of the gusty weather and the snow. When she had finished kissing me, she straightened and stepped aside with so marked a purpose that Philip could do nothing less than kiss me, too. He turned red in the face and was so confused that his kiss—intended for my

cheek or my forehead—fell by sheer accident on my lips.

“‘Now,’” said Alexandra, “‘is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer. . . .’” She, who I thought would never smile again, tossed back her hair and uttered light, high laughter. “Oh, Sophie, Sophie, every time the telephone rang, I thought they were going to tell me you were dead.”

She and Philip sat down on the edge of the bed, and there followed a long, involved business concerning the rose. She wanted to pin it onto my bed-jacket, but he objected on the grounds that the thorns might stick me. The rose was finally put into a large vase, where it looked lost and ridiculous and where Alexandra said it looked very nice. During the procedure, she had sighted the heap of unopened letters. She leafed through them, guessed at the senders, and mildly reproved me with a shrug and a sigh.

We were silent then for a minute, and in that minute I sipped the pure essence of happiness. “Alexandra,” I said, feeling that I possessed all the strength necessary to support her sorrows, “why don’t you come back after supper tonight?”

“I’d love to, Sophie darling, I’d just love to, but I’m afraid——”

“Really, it wouldn’t hurt me a bit. I feel as strong as an ox this afternoon.”

“I can come tomorrow after school again, or any time on Saturday or Sunday, any time at all.”

But what on earth, I asked myself, has she to do

with her time, now that the tryouts are over and Emmanuel is gone?

"You see, Sophie, we're working very hard right now. There's a rehearsal every evening, and a rehearsal is a thing a person simply cannot miss."

"A rehearsal for *As You Like It*?"

"What else, Sophie? What else?" She let herself fall forward across the bed, and embraced my knees. She pressed her face against my stomach and shook my whole body with her laughter. "You crazy Sophie, you would have known all about it days ago if you had just bothered to open your letters. I'm Rosalind!"

The remainder of my convalescence was one of the most delightful times that Alexandra and I ever spent together. During those weeks of tender concern, dazed springtime walks, and anecdotes about the rehearsals, I believed that a whole new epoch was opening before us. I had no notion then of what I have since learned to be painfully true: These periods of perfect unison are seldom beginnings; they are almost invariably culminations; and culminations and conclusions are all too closely related to each other.

Our felicity did not long outlive my going back to school. Within ten or twelve days, I—who had never found Alexandra more courageous, more gentle, more entertaining, and more essential to my own well-being—wished she would go and live on a desert island for a couple of years.

Now that I see the sequence of events in retrospect, I am inclined to believe she would have kept her bal-

ance if it had not been for Emmanuel's second letter. She was sane and resigned after the first one, which contained nothing except a long paean to his new violin teacher and a grave apology for the "unmentionable happenings of that unfortunate Saturday night." But the second one, probably written in a disintegrating fit of newcomer's loneliness, carried overtones of tenderness. She wore it under the wide leather belt that was setting off her narrow waist these days; she took it out and held it under her hand during lectures; and she had half the cast of *As You Like It* tearing around backstage in search of it one afternoon. The third letter was shorter, and the fourth was shorter still. The fifth, which she did not show to me, must have contained some news that should have thrown her into a state of depression. Instead, it precipitated the craziest behavior I have ever had the misfortune to witness: She was transformed into a monkey, and she acted like a monkey consistently, from morning until night.

She stood in front of the mirror in the girls' washroom, putting on lipstick and wiping off lipstick, tying her green and yellow scarf first around her waist, then around her shoulders, then around her head. She scoffed at Miss Dunovan and mimicked Dr. Dysart. She made merciless fun of Helene Blauvelt who was unlucky enough to be cast as Celia. She picked up certain questionable limericks from the boys on the stage crew, translated them into French, and said them so fast that nobody could understand. She would tease my baby brother, bending over him and chanting, "Oh, poor little Milton, poor little miserable Milton, oh, I'm so

sorry for you, isn't it a pity you were born?" until he burst into tears and howled at the top of his voice. Furthermore, there wasn't the slightest use trying to hold a sensible conversation with her, because you couldn't believe a word she said. During those weeks she invented, and told without batting an eyelash, a whole string of the most transparent and ridiculous lies.

She stole a tulip from somebody's garden and said it had been given to her by Hubert Welch, a boy who was playing Orlando and who would not have given a tulip to anybody except Annabelle Kiester, who wore imported cashmere sweaters and lived in the finest apartment house in town. She wrote letters to herself and pretended that they came from an anonymous admirer; and she cared so little whether I believed her story that she showed me those letters in her own undisguised handwriting. She said that her mother was not really German, but half French, being the daughter of a renowned old family that had settled just outside Alsace-Lorraine. Even when she told the truth—that Miss Dunovan had applauded her acting in the scene about the verses pinned on the tree, or that Helene Blauvelt had asked her to demonstrate how certain of Celia's lines should be read—she so colored and exaggerated the incident in the telling that she made the listener feel like a fool. When Andrea Viccini brought evidence against her tales, she only laughed in Andrea's face. "Are you telling me that it's a lie?" she said. "Don't be silly, Andrea. Don't you know that I know that you know it's a lie?" I never felt tempted to hem her in or break her down. If she wanted to amuse her-

self by weaving fables, that was her affair. I wondered again whether her heart might not be larger and wilder than mine, so large, so wild that it had to invent its own world. But sometimes I could not resist teasing her a little; and when she told me the tale of the strange gentleman who watched her from the balcony during rehearsals, I permitted myself to ask her, "What's he like? Is he more like Shelley this time, or more like Keats? Is he as beautiful as Tristan, or does he have a nose like Cyrano de Bergerac?"

"Come to think of it," she said meditatively, "I believe he does have something wrong with him. He's rather pale, and one of his shoulders looks higher than the other."

It was late afternoon, after rehearsal, and we were standing on the empty stage of the auditorium. Long shafts of moted springtime light fell through the high windows on the left and lay on the vacant chairs. She lifted her chin and focused her look on the front row of the balcony, and her gaze was so intent that for a moment I fancied I saw a figure there, a stooped and solemn figure, with a portentously shadowed face. An indefinable feeling of awe came over me then—perhaps because of the unaccustomed stillness and emptiness of the place—and I turned my back on the balcony as hastily as if the unknown and immaterial spectator had risen into a white beam of sun and revealed to me the eyeless countenance of Death.

"I have fifty cents. Let's stop and eat a sandwich," I said.

She continued to stare over my shoulder at the

haunted balcony. "You don't believe me because I've been telling an awful string of lies," she said. "But honestly he's been there all week, and he was there again this afternoon."

"Who is he? Somebody's boy friend?"

"Oh, no, he's old."

"Somebody's father?"

"No, of course not. Not *that* old. Anyway, he doesn't belong to anybody else. He watches *me*."

"Let's go and get a sandwich."

"All right, I'm coming. But let me tell you something else. Whenever I do something perfectly—and he is the one who knows the perfect thing, he knows much better than Miss Dunovan—whenever I do something perfect and know in my soul that it is just the way I want it to be—then, without making any noise, he claps his hands."

The thought of pale hands coming together in noiseless applause made my skin creep. "You think of the damndest things, Alexandra," I said. "If you don't mind my saying so, you've been thinking of one damned thing after another ever since you got the part. Sometimes I think I'll be glad when the play is over and done with and——" I stopped, feeling the shock of one who has walked unknowing to the edge of a cliff. I saw now for the first time that the play would be over. And what was beyond the play for her? Nothing. Nothing at all.

"You're wrong," she said, taking the green and yellow scarf from her waist and tying it around her head. "You're wrong about the time." She started down

the little flight of stairs that led into the orchestra pit. "It wasn't when I got the part that I started to do the crazy things." She looked back over her shoulder at me with mournful and accusing eyes. "*You* ought to know when it was. You ought to know it was when I got that last letter from Emmanuel."

I wish I could say that I sat awed and solemn through the five acts of *As You Like It*, as wonder-struck as a child who carries home a muddy ring and hears it called pure gold. It was a night for miracles, the sort of moist May night when the moon hangs half-dissolved and yellow in the mist, when every clump of bushes is a grove and every lighted bedroom is a bower. It was a night for miracles, and one took place before my eyes, and there were some in the crowded, humid auditorium who felt the authentic chill of revelation down their spines—some of them stopped me afterward to tell me so. But I—if I was gratified at all—was gratified only because I had been given a lighter sentence than I had dared to hope: Alexandra striding around in green doublet and hose, Alexandra striking attitudes in light that changed from warm rose to ghostly blue, Alexandra describing the condition of her heart to crepe-paper vines and cardboard trees was not nearly so embarrassing a spectacle as I had been afraid she would be.

Not that I was given no occasion for blushing. Whenever Rosalind went into transports over Orlando, I felt that Alexandra was involving the whole audience in her wretched affair with Emmanuel. I was constantly dis-

turbed by the fact that she was different from the others on the stage; I wished that her face were less mobile, her movements less fluid, her diction less clear; I wanted to tone her down, to make her retreat into the safe mediocrity of the rest. And I felt an obscure shame that she was a woman and so womanly. I wondered how many people in the audience knew that the kiss which she set on Orlando's lips was a practiced kiss, and how many thought, like myself, that Orlando must be an idiot to take her for a boy—she with those small, pert, proudly carried breasts. I wondered what my mother—who could scarcely understand the lines and certainly could not follow the complicated action of the play, with all those reptiles and exiles and lions and change-about—I wondered what my mother saw in the performance to keep her sitting on the edge of the chair, and why the woman behind the Hills said, "If that's your daughter, you people have every reason to feel proud." And yet, as I admitted to Philip during intermission, it really wasn't bad, not bad at all. . . .

There were certain surprises in it. For instance, the face that looked out from beneath the peaked and feathered cap was not the expected face. The lights, the distance, and the strain of the occasion combined to make it pure, translucent, almost exquisite. Certain undesirable aspects retreated and other excellent ones were emphasized; one ceased to see the fragile chin and was keenly aware of the fresh, bony cheeks and the clear eyes. Her movements, too, were imbued with an unsuspected grace. It was as if some precious lump of resinous stuff at the core of her being had been melted in the warmth

of the hour, had dissolved and been carried in a sustaining stream through her trunk, her thighs, her arms, her very fingertips. If her voice was too loud, I had to acknowledge that it rang clear as a bell into the most distant corners and addressed itself without visible effort to the last dusky row of the balcony. Once or twice I closed my eyes and opened them again to receive a fresh and sudden image of her; and then I was startled because she seemed pretty—quite as pretty as Helene Blauvelt in her flowery petticoat, almost as pretty as Annabelle Kiester who played a nameless lady-in-waiting in a striped satin gown.

It had not been my habit to attend the senior plays in former years, so I could not have known that the burst of applause which came at the end of the Epilogue was record-breaking in volume and persistence, an extravagant compliment to the cast and a feather in the cap of the director, Miss Dunovan. I did, however, hear somebody yell—to my embarrassment and to Philip's disgust—"Bravo! Bravo, Rosalind!" The cast in general took four curtain calls, and, because others had taken up the original "Bravo," she took two curtain calls alone. At the very last she bowed low to them, resting her chin against her collarbone and crossing her hands above her heart. A lock of silky, unmanageable hair fell down over her right eye. She pushed it away with the back of her hand, and, for no good reason, that familiar gesture touched me so deeply that I had to turn away from my mother to hide my wet eyes.

"You go back and talk to Alexandra, Sophie," my mother said. "She'll want to see you. Maybe Mr. and

Mrs. Hill might want to come over to our place, and you could bring Alexandra after she gets dressed, and we could all have a cup of tea."

It was almost impossible to move about in the packed semi-darkness backstage. I found myself in a crowd of classmates, parents, and little brothers and sisters; and, before I had taken ten steps, I was pushed against the back of one of the pieces of scenery, where I had to stand for fully five minutes, with the Principal on one side of me and an unknown man on the other. In order to avoid the Principal's eye, I stared at the nameless gentleman, and caught my breath at my own certainty. For here was the incarnation of the disquieting presence that had watched Alexandra from the balcony—a pale and elegant man, too young to be a father and too old to be a lover, his left shoulder higher than his right, his faded brown hair and sharp nose lighted up through a crack in the scenery. His right hand, pressed against his fawn-colored jacket, was withered. In his left he held a little florist's box. The box was close to me and gave off a solemn, sweet, funereal odor of flowers.

He must have felt my eyes upon him, because he turned his head and gave me a brief look. His eyes were brown, and the small yellow flecks in them were picked out by the shaft of light. The corners of his mouth—a mouth as sharply delineated as that of a Greek statue—curved upward in a remote, absent-minded, but altogether well-meaning smile.

At that moment Miss Dunovan darted toward me out of the crowd, her gray hair standing on end, her ruddy face cracked and dimpled with self-satisfaction. I

opened my mouth to greet her, then saw with some embarrassment that she was not looking at me. She began to talk with breathless energy to the man on my right, calling him "Mr. Ellery" with such arch emphasis that I almost believed I had seen his name in print. They were discussing Alexandra, and Miss Dunovan was modestly intimating that her protégé "projected herself a little too much, stuck out just a bit too plainly from the others."

Mr. Ellery laughed and shook his head. "Stuck out?" he said in a tenor voice, strangely resonant for the slight, marred body out of which it came. "Of course she stuck out, my dear lady. What else would you expect? Take a Cezanne and set it up along with fifteen or twenty pieces of junk turned out for sale in the department stores, and naturally it'll look out of place. What do you want? Perfect control in a first performance, perfect taste at the age of eighteen—what could that mean except that there's nothing to grow on, no healthy violence to control, nothing to teach, nothing to direct——"

"Oh, don't misunderstand me, I'm not suggesting for a moment that she isn't incalculably better than the rest——"

"The rest? She has the essential, authentic fire. I assure you, we ought not to mention her in the same breath with the rest."

The crowd in front of us had broken up; I no longer had any excuse for loitering; and, when Miss Dunovan turned from that superior, pale-brown stare and caught my eye, I was plainly eavesdropping.

"Why, Sophie," she said, with a faint note of remonstrance in her voice, "I was sure you were back in the dressing room with Alexandra. I know she's expecting you. She'd just begun to dress when I left her, and naturally she's a little upset and terribly tired. Won't you run over there now, dear, and see what you can do? She told her mother and father not to come backstage after the play, and there she sits, all by herself."

The picture which Miss Dunovan had sketched out for me was no more depressing than its original. In the improvised dressing room—only a patch of wall closed off by three curtains and furnished with a mirror, a jar-and-powder-laden board, and a chair—Alexandra sat alone, dressed in a ridiculous pale blue slip, her bare back toward me, her elbows propped on the board, her mournful face close to the looking glass. That childish back, with spine and shoulder blades starting sharply under the pale skin, aroused in me certain disintegrating remembrances of monkey-jackets, sour black olives, and Friday nights. A wave of tenderness swept up in me, was miraculously and conveniently transformed into enthusiasm, and broke in a foamy crest of praise which began with, "Really, Alexandra, you were wonderful," and ended with, "Everybody outside is saying you've got everything, including the authentic fire."

She listened without turning from the mirror. I watched the reflection of her face—raw from the grease paint, shiny from the cleansing cream—a curiously unconcerned and immobile face. Then suddenly she blinked, and tears ran over her cheeks. "Oh, Sophie,"

she said, "there were so many people out there to see me tonight, and all of them thought I did fine, but not Emmanuel. . . ."

In the dressing room next to hers—Annabelle Kiester's dressing room—four or five of the girls were getting ready to go to a roadhouse. They had fallen silent after a burst of laughter, and I felt certain that they had heard Alexandra. Yet, for the first time in my life, I was not concerned that she had made a public spectacle of her grief. I was much too absorbed for the moment in the realization that her grief had changed; it was not that she was really yearning for Emmanuel; it was that her heart—senselessly loyal, foolishly committed to the past—mourned over the fresh discovery that it could not really yearn for Emmanuel.

"Forget him, Alexandra."

"How could I forget him?" It was not a question. It was a terrified refusal to accept her own faithlessness.

"If he wanted you to remember, if he wanted you to——"

I never had the opportunity to finish that futile homily. One of the curtains was twitched from the outside. I snatched Alexandra's black Japanese kimono from the hook on the wall and put it around her shoulders, just as a resonant tenor voice said, "Miss Hill, may I come in?"

What came about thereafter has never seemed part and parcel of reality. It was an episode in a daydream; it was the last installment of one of Alexandra's wildest lies. Having received a faint "Yes," the gentleman with the Greek mouth and the little white box pushed aside

the curtain and came in. He stood close to us, his faded brown hair showing pale under the harsh light, his lips moving in a strange smile, at once mocking and tender. "I've taken the liberty of bringing you this," he said, laying the box on Alexandra's knee. "You were—believe me, I mean every word of it—a splendid Rosalind, a magnificent Rosalind." She was amazed beyond all answering. She only raised her head and stared into his face; and, in spite of her raw cheeks and wet eyes, she was not unbeautiful, with her forehead shining and her teeth gleaming white between her parted lips. "Count me one of your most ardent admirers," he said. "Really, my dear child, you were wonderful tonight." He smiled again, more warmly now, with scarcely a trace of mockery left on his sad, remote face. Then he bowed, stepped backward through the curtain, and was gone.

We did not speak at once. We sustained the legendary mood with silence while she opened the box and held it up so that I could see and smell the flower. It was a big, rosy camellia, the creamy petals streaked with red, the stem adorned with a double bow of red and white. The card inside was scarcely legible; the words had been written with the jerky uncertainty of a hand that has only lately learned to write. "For my favorite Rosalind, with high hopes for her success," it said.

Alexandra

P A R T T W O

EVEN to this day I have to keep reminding myself that Kenneth Ellery was a man like any other. If he steps out of the mass of humanity to trouble me these sleepless nights, if he stands between me and the winter moon with a condescending smile on his Periclean mouth and a camellia in his withered hand, that is only because coincidence endowed him with magical attributes. In himself, he is nothing—it is only that chance set him down in our lives at a certain place in a certain hour.

I ask myself over and over how he would have appeared if I had met him at an earlier time in another place. I make myself see him in varying and unimpressive guises: as the sole, spoiled son of a well-to-do Scotch-Irish family, as a lively pupil in a public high school, as one of the countless dreaming dwellers in the walk-ups of New York, as a distinguished actor, better than most but not quite so good as the best. I ask myself what he is today, and I see only such a man as I

might take for a successful executive, a slight and aging man whose left shoulder is a little higher than his right.

And yet, if I should ever meet him face to face again, knowing beforehand that this would be he, I would feel the same shock of surprise I used to experience when I ran into him sitting in Alexandra's living room. I would still ask myself, "What is he doing here?" For I always had a restless feeling that he belonged somewhere else. Somewhere else—on those floodlighted patios where a fabulous generation danced away the twenties and their youth; in the curtained cellar-restaurants where the cups were filled with bootleg gin; at a lighted window, ten stories up, opening on Central Park and a warm October night. But, now that I have visited such places, I have discovered that his habitat could not be there. No, his real dwelling place is the elusive and the unattainable, the year whose essence we were too young to taste, the club whose door was locked—and we with no cards to let us in. He was the genius of the room and the hour where we had never been and could never hope to be.

Oh, he was not an average man, I have to admit. Even a second-rate actor is not an average man, and he was an actor of considerable stature—he was Sothorn and Marlowe's Edmund, Orlando, Bassanio, and Mercutio. And he was a tragic figure, too: it is unquestionably tragic to be stricken with infantile paralysis at the height of your career; it is tragic to waken out of sickness to the knowledge that your fine, agile body is weak and one-sided now, that your charm is a crippled charm, that you will never again drop the bright sword, saying,

“‘Look for me tomorrow, and you will find me a grave man.’” But I was never one to be hushed and reverent before tragedy, and if he is fixed in my remembrance it is not because he was a great artist or suffered great unhappiness. It is because he came when he did, embodying an impossible dream and substantiating a fantastic lie. It is because—even though I frequently hung his coat in our cupboard, lounged in his living room, laid my hat on his bed—the reality was always weak, the dream was always in the ascendancy. He wanted me to be friends with him. He respected my taste; he used to make her take me with her when she went to buy clothes: “Let Sophie have a look at it, darling. Sophie’s bound to know.” He lent me books, inquired after my mother’s health, offered me, without constraint, his left hand. But what had I to do with him? What has the black ant to do with the luna moth?

But wait, there is a sin of omission somewhere in that simile. The black ant, so far as I can guess, does not resent the winged gyrations that go on above her city of sand. And I resented Kenneth Ellery; I found his behavior preposterous, not only in the last days when I saw what wounds he had inflicted in his graceful flight, but from the very start. There was something melodramatic about his having been stricken with paralysis after his second performance in *Romeo and Juliet*. There was something too pat about the fact that he had been born in our city, had loitered by the stone panther and passed the plaster St. George, had taken English VIII with our ruddy and ardent Miss Dunovan. As for his returning home in his sickness to escape the sight of the

life he could no longer share, as for his wandering back to his old school in a dazed and dreaming state one April afternoon, as for his taking an indulgent look at Miss Dunovan's latest protégé and knowing suddenly that here was the one in whom he could ripen the green greatness that soured his own spirit—all that had a spurious brightness which insulted the more sober and subtle coloring of my own world.

And when I was drawn in as witness to new incredibilities, when Mrs. Hill told me one hot June evening that Mr. Ellery had actually come to the house—such a well-mannered, soft-spoken gentleman, so willing to talk to ordinary people, so enthusiastic over a piece of lemon pie and a glass of iced tea—when I was informed that he had secured a full scholarship for Alexandra in the drama department at the local College of Fine Arts, and had asked—just imagine *him* asking—whether Alexandra could have supper with him at the Ramsay next Friday at seven—when Mrs. Hill fluttered and Alexandra wasted our whole evening in openmouthed wonderment, I was stolid, I listened with the same impassivity which I had maintained in the face of Alexandra's long string of lies. Then, at the end of the evening, I offered the first of an interminable series of objections. Everybody was so blown up with enthusiasm, so charged with dreams, that somebody had to deflate and object. "How definite is it about the scholarship? Didn't he have some letter or something from the college? I never believe I'm going to get anything until I've actually got it," I said.

He had, at any rate, left material proof that he was

taking her out to dinner. He had written on a sheet torn from a small loose-leaf notebook, "Friday, June 9, at 7, in the lobby, Ramsay Hotel." I can still see the last words ground with painful precision into the casual piece of paper. They impressed me in spite of myself, perhaps because I had always considered the Ramsay a place from which the two of us were barred for the rest of our lives. One passed the Ramsay, but never thought of entering it; and in passing one saw oleanders blooming in the lobby, heard snatches of inferior but bewitching music, caught sight of cool, disdainful young women on the terrace, drinking from tall glasses, their bare arms rosy in the glow of an orange awning, their big hats flopping above boxes of geraniums.

These days we go to the Ramsay every month or so to have a steak, my husband and I. We leave the terrace restaurant to the flies, and take a table in the big main dining room. There the oleanders have given place to rubber plants, and the waiters serve us such solid and irreproachable dinners as I could make at home for half the cost. And yet there are times when the prisms cast a glow on the tablecloth, and the magic returns, and I can see the two of them, Alexandra Hill and Kenneth Ellery, crossing the green plush rug that is no longer there to the strains of some song that nobody sings any more, settling themselves in the solemn, high-backed chairs, and seizing in their uneasiness upon the cold, moist stems of goblets broken long ago.

That was the last occasion when she dressed as she pleased. Afterward, his stamp was on everything she wore. It was he who taught her to ransack the half-off

racks for things in strange, drab colors—brick reds, brownish purples, bluish grays. "Look at the pigeons and buy pigeon colors. You're the dim sort, the muted sort," he said. It was he who taught her to rip from suit and hat and evening gown every trace of ornament, to spend half the cost of a dress on a triple strand of raw white coral that would emphasize the slenderness of her throat, to find in the window of a pawnshop a frosty pin, as delicate and intricate as a snowflake, which could be worn at a crazy angle in the flat place between her shoulder and her breast. Years later she was still looking for pigeon-colored suits and spending the equivalent of our month's rent on an Indian bracelet. But that first evening she wore what any high school graduate might wear to a dinner date—black patent leather pumps, a white net blouse with ruffles, and a white rose from the vine in the back yard, pinned by a safety pin to the band of black velvet that held back her hair.

I think she must have had a sense of female accomplishment, sitting under the crystal chandelier with her distinguished gentleman. True, he was too old to be taken for a lover. But when had Annabelle Kiester eaten cream of chicken soup with such a one as this—pressed and brushed and elegant, conversant with every item on the menu, filling all the embarrassing intervals of stillness with whimsical stories, and smiling his melancholy and superior smile? Not that the conversation was predominantly easy and gallant. Later, when she said that all through the evening she had felt an inward glow, as if there were a quiet, pinkish coal at the core of her being; later, when I insisted in a deflationary

mood that she tell me the cause of this same glow, she could not say that he had given her one compliment on her interpretation of Rosalind. The opening-night mood of the camellia was over, and something more painful, if more fruitful, had taken its place. "My dear child, the way you stood in the first scene was, to say the least, unfortunate. Maybe the costume was partly to blame, maybe there was a dragging weight on your hips. But you ought to be able to keep your stomach in even if you have two sacks of potatoes hanging from your waist. I'll have to teach you how to stand. I'll have to teach you a million things. When do we begin? How about next Tuesday afternoon?" And, when she was permitting him to see her weaknesses, when she had brought herself to tell him how, at the first sight of the white faces floating on the blackness of the theater, she had been horribly afraid, he held his left ear and made a suffering face. "Never let me hear you say 'hoarible' again. The word is not 'hoarible.' It's 'haurible.' Say it now, say it after me."

She recalled with difficulty that the main course had consisted of French-fried potatoes, spring lamb, and fresh peas, but she could not remember the taste of it at all. There had been too much to distract her: a nagging worry that at some point his left hand would not be able to deal with the food; a dread that some other word, like 'horrible,' would open up for him the black chasm of her general ignorance; an acute consciousness of her frilly blouse, the safety pin against her skull, the wilting rose in her hair. And yet, for all that, it was a festive dinner. Before the arrival of the raspberry par-

fait, she had found the courage to look him straight in the face, and had discovered that, even when the mouth spoke bitter words, the face was kind. On an impulse, she leaned across the table and made him look at her. "You've scolded me so much that I'm beginning to think you don't like me," she said.

"Don't be silly, Alexandra. Do you think I'd bother with you if I didn't like you?"

"I don't know."

Her hand lay curled on the tablecloth. He stared at the short, unpolished nails, then patted her wrist. "'Whom the Lord loveth, He chasteneth,'" he said.

That is all I can tell of their first meeting—a few witty stories, a thorough scolding, and a charitable piece of tenderness. And yet, when I sit with my husband in the main dining room on a dull Sunday evening, I know that there was much more than that: there was a volatile essence in that hour which no account can hope to recapture, an essence which seems sometimes to be gone forever and then returns in a tawdry phrase from a popular tune or a meeting of light and shade on a tablecloth. I know that the June night beyond the window was bigger and softer than it could ever be again, for her or for me. I know that there will never again be music like the muted snatches that came through the briefly opened door of the dance salon, that the chandeliers within and the street lamps outside were a hundred swollen moons, that, while the cool young women came and went among the oleanders, that she dined with a stricken hero or a wounded god. And, at the thought of his fingers falling on her wrist, I feel

an ache in my own hand. I will not hold it out to Philip or ask him to touch it, for this is such an insatiable longing as cannot be satisfied by him or by any other. It is the desire for the elusive and the unattainable—necessary, perhaps, in artists, but unbecoming in the black ant, and dangerous in the luna moth.

That summer between high school and Teachers Training School was the hottest, emptiest summer I have ever known. The Board of Admissions had interviewed me, and had decided, once I had demonstrated my skill by playing the "Turkish March" and "Bendemer's Stream" on their broken-down piano, that I might be trusted to teach music to children in the first four grades. Thereafter, I was left with three oppressive months on my hands. Philip had gone to New Jersey to visit his pretty step-cousins. Andrea Viccini was working for the summer as a maid in some professor's house, and Ruth Peterson was earning tuition in her uncle's grocery store. And Alexandra? If I saw her twice in a week, I congratulated myself. Either she was at Mr. Ellery's house, learning to fence, learning to cry, learning to fall backward without breaking her neck, or she was at home, reading plays, making faces in the looking glass, and committing whole parts to memory in a single night.

Depression descended upon me with the airless evenings. My whole family sat on the little back porch, crowded so closely together that you could not move a leg without getting a pained look, could not go into the house for a drink of water without making two people

stand up and move their chairs. I spent the greater part of those evenings thinking how much I would enjoy a glass of foamy root beer in the blessed solitude of the corner drugstore just before I went to bed. But the root beer, good as it was—and I have not tasted such creamy, yeasty root beer since—was not enough to compensate for the deadly evenings or to resign me to the even more deadly nights. I would come back home restless, unfulfilled, and angry to find my bedroom so hot. For the first time in my life, I could not sleep; I lay with my shoulders propped up on the pillow and stared resentfully into the dark. And Philip—what was he doing tonight? I saw him walking with one or the other of his silky-haired step-cousins down an interminable stretch of moonlit lawn. And *she*? The devil with her and her “Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?” No doubt she had time to sit with Mr. Ellery on a wrought-iron bench in the impressive garden at the back of his impressive house. No doubt she preferred the long glasses of lemonade she drank with him to the mugs of root beer we might have drunk together.

And when she did find an evening to waste on me, I did not want to be alone with her. She talked endlessly about him and her work and herself. I barely listened: I sat in sullen silence, despising the present and regretting the past. We found it more tolerable on such occasions to spend the time in a movie. There, relieved of embarrassment by the darkness and stirred by the scene before us, we would sometimes reach out to each other, we would even clasp hands. It was after

such a wordless and spurious reconciliation in a movie that she made me stop outside in the glare of a bakery shop window.

"Sophie, what's the matter with you and me?" she said, staring with her disturbing ardor into my face.

"Nothing's the matter with you and me. We just don't see each other any more."

"Do you think it's because I don't want to see you?"

"How should I know?"

"Try not to be annoyed with me, Sophie. When we were in grade school and you had to visit your aunts, I remember I used to be very annoyed with you. But I got over it. It wasn't your fault. If you had to go to see them, then you had to go, that's all."

"But that was different. I wasn't constantly just crazy to run out and see my aunts," I said.

She set her teeth into her lower lip and turned from me to stare at the soggy doughnuts and the limp napoleons. "It's scarcely like a holiday, working up at his house," she said.

"Oh, I imagine you enjoy yourself."

"Enjoy myself? What do you think I do up there?"

"Really, I can't say that I know."

"Well, I can assure you that I work. I work like a dog. Afterwards, I'm so tired I can scarcely walk to the streetcar, and when I go to sleep, it's exactly as if I were dead."

In the hot light that flooded through the show window, I could see the tired sagging of her cheeks. But I remained stubbornly silent.

"Sophie, I should think by now you ought to know

that I'd be very glad to spend every evening for the rest of my life in your house——”

“You'd be crazy if you did,” I said.

She turned from the window with such fervor that two boys stood still and stared at her and drew revolving wheels on their temples with their fingertips. “Don't stop being close to me, Sophie. If you stop being my friend, I won't have a friend in the world.”

“Isn't *he* your friend?”

“Kenneth?” She leaned her forehead against the glass and gave way to something between weeping and laughter. “Sophie, you must be out of your head. You just don't know what it's like at all. Come over to his place on Monday. He's making me do Cordelia—you know, Cordelia in *King Lear*. You have a lot of insane notions, if you don't mind my saying so, and you'd better come over and see.”

Sometimes on pleasant evenings I walk my daughter past the house that used to belong to the Ellerys. It is not the same house that it was on that first August afternoon. Something more than the illusory glow passed from it when the two of them left it—the old lady to take up her place among the elect in the Protestant Cemetery, and he to move from coast to coast. She would never have permitted watermarks to streak the slim Colonial pillars, and he would never have allowed a cloudy whiteness to gather on the pale brick facade. The double bays have a naked look without those silky flesh-pink curtains that used to catch the sun. The reception hall, carpetless now and strewn

with toys, will never again possess the Old World elegance which struck me silent that afternoon when the scarlet roses, smitten by the heat, dropped their petals on the console, and the beveled edge of the mirror was an audacious rainbow in the shadowy solemnity.

It was the old lady who let me in. I thought then that she was remote and emaciated because she was eaten up by her son's misery. I know better now; were I to see her today, I would remember my mother and tell myself, "She feels her death stirring within her. She is on the way to her grave." But at the moment I saw in her only a somewhat excessive grief over her son, and a precision and gentility calculated to put the lower class in its place. Not that she was in the least inhospitable. She indicated that she recognized my existence by calling me by name; she remarked that the day was oppressively hot and told me that if I walked upstairs and turned to the right I would find myself straight in the second-floor sitting room. But the glance which followed me up the curved white staircase was markedly casual. If a fly had buzzed past her fine Greek nose, she would have turned her head neither more nor less.

The upstairs living room, like the rest of the house, smelled of polished wood and flowers. My household-er's heart kept me brooding on the threshold, speechless and envious, wanting to own a room like this—all pink and mauve and flesh-colored, bright with mirrors and gleaming table tops and bowls of larkspur and mignonette. I must have stood staring for a full minute before Mr. Ellery said, "What's the matter, Sophie?

Don't you want to associate with us? Come on in." He and Alexandra were standing in the bay at the opposite end of the room, against one of the long, sun-drenched curtains, he in his shirt sleeves and she—God Almighty!—she in her white cotton princess slip. He saw the disapproval in my face and smiled. "Take off as many of your clothes as you like, Chickie," he said. "It's insufferably hot in here. We're all of a sweat ourselves. Come over and see."

I walked past a magnificent striped sofa, past a silvery hassock, over a confusion of hand-hooked rugs scattered across the floor. It was only when I was face to face with the two of them and had taken his outstretched left hand that I stopped examining the room and gave them my attention. And then I found them surprisingly pleasing to look at, standing in the bright, hot light that streamed through the curtained bay—both of them slender and well-knit, both of them glossy with sweat, their thin clothes clinging to their spare bodies, their faces flushed with an excitement which I had seen heretofore in nobody but lovers. Could they ever possibly be lovers? I asked myself. And he asked me whether I wouldn't like a glass of iced tea.

Her forehead wrinkled. "Let's get back to work, Kenneth," she said. "Sophie can get herself some tea if she wants it. It's right over there on the coffee table, darling, just help yourself. I'll wait for mine until we've finished the tent scene. Excuse us, Sophie, we've got to work, we had so much trouble with that scene yesterday."

"Oh, come now." He took her by the elbow and steered her toward the coffee table. "You can't make liquid murmurings with a dry palate. Have a glass of iced tea."

I do not remember what we talked about while we held the misty glasses and ate the thin, crustless sandwiches of cucumbers and watercress. I remember only that there was a mannered animation about the conversation which made me feel stolid and annoyed; that she addressed him as "Milord" in a faintly mocking voice; that "Lamb" was her name and "Chickie" was mine; that his shrunken arm showed too plainly for decency through the thin stuff of his shirt, and that her naked shoulders kept drawing my glance. She stood, like the mistress of the house, between the sofa and the coffee table, handing out tea and sandwiches; and at first it seemed to me that she was flaunting the fact that she felt at home in the place. But before we had wiped our fingers on the linen napkins and returned to the sunny bay, I knew that there was no such thought in her head. She was passing things out to save him the trouble of reaching for them; only part of her attention was fixed on the chatter, the rest was busy with small stratagems to save him from the realization that he had only one hand to use, and it was the success of these minor tactics which gave her the flush and the air of eagerness. Before he had set his empty glass on the table, she had pushed a heavy, satiny chair into the bay, against the bright draperies. "Here is your chair, Milord," she said. "Sink down, subside, go to sleep, let us begin."

“Wait a minute, we have a physician. Chickie, pick up the book. You’re sitting on it. No, excuse me, it’s lying to the left of your chair. You be the doctor. Page eighty-eight, halfway down. Lamb, you start with ‘Had you not been their father,’ etcetera. All set? Well, then, I’ll go to sleep.” He composed his wiry body in the chair. His good hand trailed over the arm of it, the fingers loose and still. His withered right hand lay limp at his side. He turned his face sideward and upward, so that the silk-muted sunlight lay full on his eyelids. His eyes were not quite closed. Narrow chinks of yellow-flecked brown were visible and frighteningly alive in the relaxed emptiness of the rest of the face. I could see the pupils moving. I could see them focusing on her as she came and bent above him.

“ ‘Had you not been their father, these white flakes
Had challenged pity of them——’ ”

“In the name of Jesus Christ, my dear girl! How are you standing? I assure you, if we were on the stage together, I couldn’t deliver a single living line. I’m absolutely oppressed by your heaviness. You’re unleavened bread, you’re a stone.”

“ ‘Had you not been their father, these white
flakes——’ ”

“Float, float. Think of a humming bird.”

She moved back a few paces and advanced upon him again, tossing back her hair. And now her stance above

him was light, tremulous, agitated. Her face was so close to his that her breath stirred the faded brown curls at his brow.

“ ‘Had you not been their father, these white flakes
Had challenged pity of them. Was this a face
To be opposed against the warring winds?——’ ”

Now, I thought, she has found her balance in the air, she will float through the rest of this. . . . But he opened his eyes and gave her a wry, yellow look. “All right, never mind the next nine lines,” he said. “You do them well enough, which is no great wonder, since they’re high-minded and self-righteous and you have a particular talent—usually present in the immature—for high-minded self-righteousness. Address the physician. Come, hurry up. You’re childish and dependent here, you’re scared, you’ve lost your guts.”

She turned to me with a look of flustered entreaty that almost made me lose my place. “ ‘He wakes, speak to him,’ ” she said, wringing her hands, just as she used to wring them when she saw one of the consecrated chickens being dragged out of the cage. Mr. Ellery liked that. He smiled, and made only a faint grimace at my flat, “ ‘Madam, do you, ’tis fittest.’ ”

But he was not often pleased that afternoon. Most of his comments were taunts, and those taunts were the more blasting because they issued out of the almost motionless mouth of the sleeping king and scarcely ruffled his dazed and vacant face. He winced when she

asked him to hold his hands in benediction o'er her. He found her "‘And so I am, I am’" about as touching as a jingle by Eddie Guest. When she knelt, he could hear every bone in her body creak. I had been under the impression that she had called me in to show me her labors, and I was at once touched and angry that she was willing to have me witness her disgrace. Her face grew whiter and more strained with every stroke of his bitter wit; her mouth trembled; and I thought that she must hate him, since, unless hard hate dried up her tears, she would surely weep.

"Shall we go back a bit?" he said. "I'll start with 'Yet I am doubtful.' That'll give you time to warm up to your cue."

"How very kind of you, Milord." For the first time, there was rebellion in her voice and in the sidewise tilt of her head.

"Very well. I'll not bother. Start cold. Give us your incomparable interpretation of 'And so I am, I am.' Come, come."

"I can't say it, Kenneth."

"Really? I had the impression you thought you could."

"You know I can't." She looked up, kneeling before him in her cotton princess slip, and nothing but slavish compliance was left in her eyes. "Please let's go back, Kenneth. Give me my cue."

He skipped the opening half of his speech out of spite. He began flatly and in anger, but his love of the lines betrayed and transfigured him. His voice, rich and tremulous, rose above the summer sound of wind in

the leaves, and I saw the old king in a sun-drenched tent, gazing in wonderment at his reclaimed daughter—a fool and a sage, vulnerable and sublime.

“‘Yet I am doubtful; for I am mainly ignorant
What place this is, and all the skill I have
Remembers not these garments, nor I know not
Where I did lodge last night. Do not laugh at me;
For, as I am a man, I think this lady
To be my child Cordelia.’”

And she—was she transported out of the present moment, or was she savoring its poignancy? Had long practice and the magic of the words taught her to weep in the French camp near Dover? Or was it the futile gesture which his withered hand had made toward his shirt when he spoke of “these garments” that loosed her tears? In any case, she wept, and said in such a voice as brought a rise of tears to my own eyes, “‘And so I am, I am.’”

The back of his left hand touched her cheek, stroked it with gentleness. “Don’t blubber, darling,” he said. “You did that exquisitely.

“‘Be your tears wet? yes, faith. I pray, weep not;
If you have poison for me, I will drink it.
I know you do not love me; for your sisters
Have, as I do remember, done me wrong.
You have some cause, they have not.’”

She caught his fingers, pressed them to her mouth, and said, sobbing against them, “‘No cause, no cause.’”

And I knew—so plainly that I lost my place and could be neither the physician nor the Earl of Kent—I knew they were no longer on the English plain, but touched each other and were reconciled in this room, this hour. It was just as well that I kept silent. They had no need of me. My voice would have been an intrusion upon their exaltation and their intimacy. She circled his waist with her arm, she drew him up against her, saying, “‘Will it please your highness walk?’” And he was no king in Britain, he was utterly himself when he told her, half in mockery, half in remorse and tenderness, brushing his cheek against hers,

“‘You must bear with me.

Pray you now, forget and forgive. I am old and foolish.’”

Yet, through the brief remainder of the afternoon—the sun was withdrawing from the curtains when he came and took the book out of my hands and laid it among the plates and glasses on the coffee table—yet, though they had embraced before my eyes, I no longer thought it possible for them to become lovers. Their faces, side by side against the mauve and pink stripes of the sofa, ruled out any such possibility. The flesh of her cheeks looked young, pliant, moist; she was fresh and resilient in the certainty of his satisfaction. But he, brooding on old, soured triumphs, was limp and lusterless. His cheeks sagged, his eyes were strained and yellowish, he was plainly out of breath. His left hand,

lying on the spread flounce of her petticoat, was so quiet that to question its being there seemed a piece of evil-mindedness; and, when she said that it was time to go, the look he turned upon her was a look of relief.

While I buttoned up the back of her blue cotton dress, I was further reassured by learning that she was thinking of Emmanuel. The three of us had been discussing, in a somewhat subdued and desultory fashion, the sort of music that should be played during the tent scene; and she said in a grave voice that the only suitable music was Bach's *Komm', süsser Tod*.

"What's that, darling?" he asked, wandering around the room with a cigarette in his hand.

"A chorale or something." She glanced into a darkening mirror, smoothed her hair, and started for the door, singing softly:

" 'Come, sweet death.
Come, dear rest.' "

He put out his cigarette and followed us to the head of the stair. She was to his right, I to his left, and he slipped his companionable left arm through mine. "Must be something she heard in church once, eh, Chickie?" he said.

"No, I heard it on a phonograph, in a cold house, on a cold afternoon. A friend of mine, a boy I knew once—he played it for me. Isn't it beautiful?

" 'Komm', süsser Tod.
Komm', liebe Ruh.' "

"Too mournful, Lamb. Much too mournful for the scene in the tent."

She turned on the first step and gave him her hand and a compliant nod. But when she and I had passed through the reception hall and were alone together in the ruddy street, she looked out of the corner of her eye and smiled a remote, disturbing smile. "You know, don't you, that Kenneth's utterly wrong about *Komm' süsser Tod*," she said. "There's nothing mournful about it. It draws you on—it calls upon you to surrender and immerse yourself. No. . . ." She stood still in the empty street, looking at the molten sunset. "It makes a kind of warm, golden, drowning lake out of death."

I knew from the beginning that I would have my troubles with this part of the story. On one other occasion—an evening when Les Talbot tried to coax me into remembering Alexandra's early youth—I went back reluctantly through the last years of the 1920's and the first of the '30's; and then, as now, I found them dazingly thin. I can recall countless incidents from more remote periods, but then suddenly there is this thinness, this dropping off; and it is as though, walking up a long avenue lined on either side with close-set trees, I suddenly felt bleak light on my eyelids and looked up through a few meager boughs at an empty sky.

And, like the branches of a solitary tree seen against vacant blueness, the incidents which I do recall have a new sharpness and clarity. When I remember anything, I remember every detail of it. For instance, the papier-mâché rock she was making that evening when I came

to see her at the College of Fine Arts—it is as permanent in my recollection as the shape of Italy on the map. I see that rock, double-peaked and massive, half of it torn strips of newspaper soaked in glue, half of it painted in layers of gray for stone and green for moss. I see her hand, and the broad paint brush in her hand, and the streaks of gray and olive green on her wrist. She is working late in the Prop Room behind the stage of the School Theater. The rocks must be ready for tomorrow, because tomorrow is dress rehearsal for *The Cherry Orchard*; and although, being a lowly freshman, she has no part in the play, she will have the satisfaction of seeing her rock lying in a melancholy stretch of Russian meadowland. She wears the uniform of her caste: dark blue overalls, a white shirt, open at the throat, and a pair of low-heeled shoes. She crouches on one side of the rock, hidden from me partly by the papier-mâché peaks and partly by the fall of her hair, and I sit on the other side, on a cerise sofa pillow which I must by no means mislay, since Madame Ranevsky will rest her elbow on it tomorrow night.

There are others around us, and sometimes they intrude upon us. Somebody wants the can of gray paint, and somebody else wants the turpentine. The gangling, elegant director, of whom I am a little in awe, chides her for her slowness and then, lest I should think he considers me partly responsible for her dawdling, gives me a disarming smile. A boy, a very handsome one, smacks her gently on the buttocks as he passes. A supercilious young woman with flaming hair strokes the top of her head and says, "Good night now, Sweet." And

yet we manage to hold a conversation—such a conversation as is not suitable for recounting to Les Talbot—while somewhere not too far off, probably on the stage, a hammer bangs away and, for no reason at all, keeps making me think of the stroke of doom.

This evening I have come to the College of Fine Arts with a purpose. My Aunt Leah from California has been staying with us for the last six days, and I have had the benefit of her frank and lively pronouncements on matters of the heart. She has informed me over the dishpan that I should content myself with seeing Philip in private only once a week. If I saw him oftener, we might be tempted to engage in that particular activity which, though highly desirable in itself, can be enjoyed now only at the cost of a home, children, respectability. My Aunt Leah's counsel scarcely seems applicable to my particular case, since I have yet to see Philip reach for my hand. But I am uneasy over the rites performed in the mauve and pink sitting room. I cannot be certain that there is a clean dividing line between an actor's kiss and a lover's kiss, and I have been distressed to hear that the work under consideration at the moment is *Romeo and Juliet*.

"How's Mr. Ellery?" I ask, and blush because I know perfectly well that I don't give a damn how he is.

"I don't know." The paint brush moves slowly up the slope of the rock. "I don't guess he's terribly well. He's always tired."

I am not altogether sorry to hear it. I consider continual lassitude an excellent buckler for fainting chas-

tity. And yet I remain disquieted. Without raising her eyes from the rock, she describes to me too minutely the symptoms of his weariness. The paint brush strokes the papier-mâché, and I cannot rid myself of the thought that she sees herself stroking his temples. And while she speaks I am prodded, by her maudlin concern over his not-too-impressive afflictions, into asking a question which I have suppressed through August, September, October, and November:

"Look, now, is it possible that you love Mr. Ellery?"

"Of course I love him. Why shouldn't I love him? Hasn't he taught me everything I know? Whom should I love better? My father? My mother? They haven't the slightest notion of what I really am. Besides, they love each other so much, they have no room left for loving me. But Kenneth—of course I love him. I love him with all my heart."

But the very fervor of her affirmation has given it the color of an evasion. She paints energetically now, spattering her overalls, splashing a small blob of gray close to Madame Ranevsky's sofa pillow.

"You better be careful. You're throwing paint half-way across the room. What I want to know is—exactly how do you love him?"

"Do you really want to know? He has a big black poodle dog that follows him around and sleeps on his bed. I wish I were his dog. I wish I would never have to leave his house while he was in it. I wish I could lie across the bottom of his bed every night."

I do not find this state of affairs reassuring, yet I take

some comfort in the fact that she has specified the *bottom* of his bed. I tell her that she is exaggerating in this as she exaggerates in everything, that she certainly does not literally want to be a dog, and that she seemed reasonably happy to be where she was, without his company, before I mentioned his name.

"Well, Sophie, if it makes you comfortable to think I'm happy, go ahead and think so."

"Aren't you happy?"

"Oh, 'like to the lark at break of day arising from sullen earth.' "

"Don't be a fool."

"Am I a fool?"

"If you make love with him, you'll certainly be a fool."

She sets aside the can of gray paint and takes up the green, but her brush remains suspended above it. Her face has a solemn, listening look, perhaps because a solitary flutist has begun to practice in one of the music rooms on the second floor. Her eyes look larger and more luminous than usual, and a secretive smile indents the corners of her lips. "To tell the truth, Sophie," she says in a breathy voice, "I can't tell—I really don't know whether Ken and I are making love. Because of these damned rocks I missed a whole hour with him yesterday afternoon. When I walked in, he seemed very glad to see me. I had the feeling he'd thought I might not come. We had only half an hour left to work in, and we sat on the hassock together, going over the lines, and all the time we sat there he held on to my hand. His hand—his good hand, I mean—is wonderful to

touch, always cool, always dry. I like his other hand even better. I don't know why, I just do. I want him to touch me, of course. I would feel awful, I would feel unutterably lonely if he ever forgot to touch me, if I had to go away without his touching me at all. Once last week, when I was sleepy, I put my head down on his chest and kept it there for a long time, until I could tell by the way he breathed that he was getting tired. I loved the smell of his shirt. I could have stayed there breathing it for hours."

Suddenly I am warm and weary. The magic of the elusive and unattainable life in the mauve and pink room is upon me; I cannot censure; I even find it difficult to suppress a slow and meaningless smile. The far-away flutist makes himself heard above the hammer blows, and I have a concept of urgent love asserting itself against the certainty of death. And yet she waits for me to answer, and I cannot put all my good intentions by. I say as mildly and abstractly as possible that men in general are inclined to despise women who permit them—well, too many intimacies.

"Honestly, Sophie, I think you're mistaken about that." She begins to paint again, because the director is strolling toward us. "I really don't believe that Kenneth despises me."

"It's only that men don't marry women if they——"

"My God, Sophie!" She sits back on her heels and laughs in my face. "You don't for a moment imagine that Ken Ellery would ever think of marrying *me*?"

"Well, I don't know, I——"

"Oh, darling, let's be sensible. You see how it's

turned out for me, always. Paul Zoldi wouldn't have me. Emmanuel forgot me in a month. Willie, here—that one who smacked me across the tail before he left—he'd be good for about ten or twelve days. I am what I am—an ugly, skinny girl, with no shape at all and a plain face and little eyes. Who would want me? If I were a great actress, maybe then somebody might want me. But as I am—Ken Ellery, with his elegance and his sophistication and his fame?—oh, Sophie, don't *you* be a fool."

I cannot answer her because the director is standing above us. She does not seem to mind in the least that he could not have avoided hearing her last three sentences. He bends over her, takes her hand and the brush in her hand, and pushes them up and down the side of the rock. "Lights out in ten minutes, dear," he tells her, and goes away to supervise two boys who are polishing a samovar.

"Oh, no, Sophie," she says, laughing, "I'll not be giving up what little I have on a one-in-ten-million chance that he'll take it into his head to marry me."

"Well, hold his hand and kiss him if you like, Alexandra. Only, don't—you know what I mean."

"Oh, *that*. Don't worry. I won't do *that*. Not because it might keep him from marrying me. Only because I haven't any use for it. You won't, either. Everbody makes so much of it, and it isn't even a thing in itself."

A profound sadness settles upon me at the thought that anyone can disparage the ultimate mystery, and I sit in silence for some minutes while she covers the last shred of gluey paper with a veil of moss. The rock is

finished, and she is willing to turn her back on it and the subject at the same moment, but I catch her hand and ask her what she means by saying that it isn't a thing in itself.

"Well, you think about it beforehand and try to make a thing out of it. And afterwards, when it's over, you think about it again and try to tell yourself it was good. But while it happens it's nothing, absolutely nothing. It simply isn't a thing in itself. Anyhow, you're forgetting Madame Ranevsky's sofa pillow. I knew you would."

She cleans the floor, her hands, and her overalls with a rag soaked in turpentine. She lays Madame Ranevsky's pillow beside Madame Ranevsky's comfit box, puts on a fuzzy coat and a white angora tam-o'-shanter, and moves toward the door. The director and the boys call good night to us, and we walk into the hall just as the lights flicker a warning. The flute is silent, but there are a few more hammer blows before the dark and the hush set in. She is merry enough beside me on the campus in the crisp autumnal air, but I cannot respond to her merriment. What is there to laugh about, what is there to live for if she is right, if it isn't really a thing in itself?

If Alexandra had not worked herself down to skeletal proportions that winter, it might never have occurred to Mr. Ellery to go out with her in the evenings. He took her out primarily for the purpose of feeding her. He introduced her to every first-class restaurant in town and stuffed her with lobster à la Newburg, rare

filet mignon, hot rolls, French pastry, and bootleg wine. I have never figured out precisely why it gave him so much pleasure to watch her eat. He was a gourmet himself, and maybe his pedagogical instincts were gratified by the speed with which she learned to appreciate all the delicacies of an international cuisine. Or perhaps their mutual dinners were the fruit of some kindlier impulse: being sick himself, he may have been happy in the thought that he could purchase well-being for somebody else. He bought fresh ground steak every day for his crazy black poodle, and took evident delight in the fact that his dog looked sleek and well-fed. At any rate, he and Alexandra ate dinner together at his expense sometimes three, sometimes four times a week. And often, later in the evening, they would come to look for Philip and me, would wander into my house, light-minded and a little raucous with the quantities of wine they had consumed; or they would telephone us from downtown and ask us to be their guests at a concert, a movie, or an opening night.

At first we were happy enough to have them descend upon us. We had spent so many evenings listening to the same records, Charlie Pryor had played us his choice but limited repertoire so many times, Andrea Viccini had grown so sour and resentful, and Ruth Peterson so prissy and boring that anything, even a bad play, was a relief. But after a while their sudden visits became burdensome. There was some tightening tension between Alexandra and Mr. Ellery. If they were happy, their happiness was loudmouthed and bizarre; it annoyed Philip, puzzled my parents, and kept my baby

brother awake. And if they were out of sorts they were downright embarrassing; he taunted her about her acting in a manner which showed everybody that he was eaten up by jealousy, and she made a spectacle of herself by shedding tears into her plate. By the end of the winter things had come to the point that Philip and I exchanged despairing looks at the sound of the doorbell or the telephone.

Late in March I had a spat with Alexandra. She broke three successive lunch dates with me, and I told her she might go straight to the devil. She had a minor part in *The Cradle Song*, the last production of the year, and a person would have thought she was playing the lead for all the fuss she made. She attended every rehearsal, even when the director was running through a scene in which she did not appear; she borrowed prayer books from Catholics; she visited cathedrals and walked around with a sanctified look; and Andrea Viccini said there was already the suggestion of a halo trembling over her head. I did not see her for three weeks, and I scarcely missed her. I knew she was bound to come around before the opening of *The Cradle Song*, and I bided my time and congratulated myself on my strong-mindedness.

It was the fifteenth of April, a warm, drizzling day of yellow-green leaves and pale puddles, when I saw her again. I remember the date because it was Philip's birthday. My father had given me a dollar to spend for a present, and Philip and I went downtown together immediately after supper to ransack the second-hand bookstore. That evening had a memorable fragrance of its own: the smell of grapefruits and potted hyacinths

in the open market stalls is inextricably mingled in my recollection with the musty smell of old books and the freshness of the first spring rain. We found a copy of Bertrand Russell's *Skeptical Essays*, and Philip was so delighted that he put his arm through mine when we walked into the moist, gray, evening street. The arc lights came on at the corners just as we stepped out, and it was so lovely that, in spite of the drizzle, we sauntered through the Greek section, where we met a yellow cat, and into the Chinese section, where we saw strange vegetables, paper lanterns, and heaps of pale, flowery tea.

I think we were studying a kind of purple squash when the door of a Japanese restaurant across the street opened and Alexandra came running at us, light as a bird, over the slippery cobblestones. "Oh, Sophie, oh, Sophie darling, how lucky that we caught sight of you! Please come on in and eat with us," she said.

I did not answer because I was struck dumb at the sight of her. She was dressed in a dove-gray suit, and she wore a hat with a soft gray veil and a pair of bluish wings. Her eyes were shining in her glowing face. She looked utterly happy and unbelievably beautiful.

"You look very nice," Philip said.

"Thank you. That's because I feel so good. Please come on in."

I told her, with a touch of pique in my voice, that we had eaten our dinner more than an hour ago.

"Then come anyway and have some water chestnuts and a cup of hot saki wine. Please come. I want you to help me celebrate."

“What are you celebrating?”

She laughed and became skittish and evasive. “Nothing, really. Just anything. The fifteenth of April. *The Cradle Song*. This air—this wonderful, damp, germinating air. The spring—the rites of spring.”

I stared through the gray veil at her radiant face and thought that such moments are rare and brief at best. I might never forgive myself if I broke, for the sake of a childish quarrel, whatever bright, transitory bubble it was that she held between her eager hands. “All right,” I said. “A person can always find room for nuts and wine. Besides, we have something to celebrate ourselves. It’s Philip’s birthday.”

She kissed him. “There,” she said. “I hope you live for a hundred years.” And she took us both by the hands and pulled us across the street, through a shadowy doorway, and into a room where paper lanterns glowed and dusty artificial appleblossoms hung in garlands on the wall.

Something was bubbling away over a little gas burner in the middle of the table at which Kenneth Ellery sat. Paper-thin slices of beef and shreds of such strange vegetables as we had seen in the shop windows were puffing and curling there, and they gave off such a savory scent that my mouth began to water. Mr. Ellery explained that this was suki-yaki and that one of these long copper pans held enough to feed an army. Alexandra announced that today was Philip’s birthday, and there were congratulations and appreciative comments on Bertrand Russell, his lucidity, and his skepticism. We settled down cozily, close to the show-window, with

our knees touching under the little table, the lanterns glowing on one side of us and the April evening gleaming through the spotted glass on the other. An imbecilically cheerful Japanese boy in a soiled tuxedo brought us French-fried shrimps and a pungent brown sauce to dip them in, and before we knew it we were committed to a four-course dinner and were liking Mr. Ellery a good deal better than we had ever liked him before.

Even when he was at his friendliest, I could not bring myself to encounter for any length of time the furry softness of his eyes. But during the first two courses I looked at him often enough to see that he, too, had undergone some metamorphosis—nothing so startling as the change that had come upon Alexandra, but a marked metamorphosis, nevertheless. He was impeccably shaved and pressed and brushed. He wore a new tie—the bold tie of a man who is pleased with himself. The skin of his face looked tighter and fresher, and a certain twitching muscle in his cheek, which had annoyed me on former occasions, was considerably still. In fact, there was something hushed and sedate about his whole bearing: he used such words as “positively” and “marvelous” less frequently than usual; and the one joke that he told us over our bowls of pale yellow soup was innocent and kind.

I recall that she was unusually silent while we ate the suki-yaki. She sat with her back to the show-window, and the softened colors of the smoggy city showed behind her—sooty stoops and dripping gutters, lighted windows and a few crooked, sprouting ailanthus boughs. Now her veil was away from her face, folded back over

the gray felt and the bluish wings. If I close my eyes, I can see that hat more clearly than the face; the face is an incandescence—a parted mouth, bright cheeks, and shining eyes. Once she put down her fork and sat smiling at a paper lantern, and he laid his good hand over her hand and said, "Come on, now, eat your dinner, dear." I had heard him call her "Lamb" and "darling," but he had never called her "dear" in my presence before. Perhaps, I thought, in these three weeks he has asked her to marry him. And I waited, holding my breath, until he released her thin, chapped hand, and I saw it lying, ringless, on the tablecloth. That was not it, then. A man of his position would certainly have provided a ring. . . . Before she took up her fork again, she raised the back of her hand, still warm from his touch, and held it against her glowing cheek, and smiled.

When the talk came around to the theater, she made a few tentative comments for courtesy's sake, but her tongue was not really loosened until she had swallowed her two little cupfuls of heated saki wine. I had never tasted saki before that evening, nor have I ever been tempted to drink it since. Like the Roman emperor who drank from the myrrhine goblet to celebrate a high event and smashed it to bits on the marble floor lest it be desecrated in a less exquisite hour, I have devoted saki to a single April evening whose essence I have not looked for since and could not find again if I tried. We consumed the golden, aromatic contents of two china cruets among us; I had three cups and stopped at that only because Philip said he thought I had had quite

enough; my fingers were so warm and slow that I could scarcely deal with the almond cookies which the waiter brought because there were no more water chestnuts, and yet my mind seemed aerial and nimble, and I was capable of witticisms that delighted even the worldly wise Mr. Ellery.

It was the saki that set Alexandra to talking about how great an actress she was going to be. She sat with her elbows propped on the table and her chin in her hands, telling us all in a soft and breathy voice how she was going to be Shelley's Beatrice and Webster's Vittoria and Shakespeare's Juliet. She must have been going on like that for half an hour, she was telling us how she was going to do Shaw's *Saint Joan*, when Kenneth stroked her cheek and said, "The hell you are."

"No? Don't you think I'm good enough? Don't you think I might be good enough some day?"

"That isn't the point, Lamb. Say you were good enough. What difference would it make? You wouldn't have a chance."

"Honestly, Ken, I think all of you make it much worse than it is. It can't be as bad as all that."

"If you don't think so now, you'll think so later, my dear. Just as they tell you at school, it's a——"

"If I believed everything they tell me at school, I'd go out and hang myself."

"All right. Wait and see. The American theater is a shambles. The American theater is a slaughterhouse. The American theater is a big business, run solely for the benefit of the men who own the walls, the ceilings, the chairs on which the American public parks its great,

stolid carcass in order to watch a show—any damned show at all. Beatrice Cenci? Vittoria? Juliet? You'll be lucky, my poor darling, if you're permitted to play a sentimental bitch in a third-rate bedroom comedy."

He said a good deal more than that. Philip, who had taken only two cups of the saki, asked a whole series of pertinent questions and drew from him the picture of a tawdry edifice constructed over a cesspool, a crazy, jerry-built tower ready to crash on the heads of those inside, and beautiful to the bewildered onlooker only because it was plastered all over with tinsel and fool's gold. I could not listen too carefully because the wine was humming in my head, and in my restlessness I stared at Alexandra and saw that she, too, had turned from them and was watching the coming down of night.

"Alexandra, don't you care?" I said.

"About what, darling?" For the first time that evening her gaze rested full upon me, and I sensed a new warmth and depth in her eyes.

"Don't you care if the theater is rotten and they don't put on the great plays anymore?"

"Honest to God, Sophie, I don't care in the least. Not tonight, anyway," she said.

"Really, why?"

"If I never got a good part, if I died without ever having had a good part, if I died this minute—no, if I died at, well, say one or two o'clock tonight—I'd be perfectly happy. I've had so much. I've had more than I ever expected I could have in this world."

Mr. Ellery kissed her on the cheek. "Eat your almond

cookie, darling," he said. "Be careful. There's a slip of paper with your fortune on it baked inside."

And so there was—a thoroughly inapplicable fortune for each of us, couched in the worst possible English and typed on a scroll of delicate rice paper. Philip had eaten half of his by mistake. Alexandra took hers and mine and spread them out, blank side up, on the table. Then she found a pencil in her purse and began to write diligently on the backs, in so small a script that nobody could see.

"What are you writing, Lamb?"

"A letter for Sophie. Don't bother me, please. It's important. I have to put it just right."

She worked for several minutes before she rerolled the scrolls, reached for my purse, and put them inside. I did not think of them again until close to midnight, when I was standing in my nightgown at my bedroom window, looking out at the drenched black roofs and listening to the rain. I found them at the bottom of my purse then, and unrolled them under the lamp. They were very hard to read because the handwriting was pale and small, but I figured them out at last.

"Dear Sophie:

Do you remember last fall when you came to see me make the rock in the Prop Room? I gave you a piece of gross misinformation then. That was because I was under a grave misapprehension myself. (next page, please) I was utterly wrong when I disparaged you-know-what. I wish to assure you that it is—it definitely is—a thing in itself."

Fortunate are the lovers who have no history. Philip and I—we had no history. A record of what passed between us during the four years when I was at Teachers Training and he was studying mathematics at the University would be nothing but a tiresome reiteration of the obvious. The only signal events that the two of us shared were the universal and primeval ones. And even these, in our particular case, made nobody curious and left nobody scandalized. The stages of a questionable relationship are subject-matter for gossip only when they are acted out by colorful people. In our case, the world, more out of boredom than out of mercy, shrugged at our uninteresting misdemeanors and let us alone.

So when Alexandra and I spent a few hours in each other's company—we confined our time together now to Sundays between two and five, and discharged our limited obligations to each other with commendable constancy—I had very little to relate. When she asked me, "How are things going between you and your boy?" I said, "Oh, the same old business. Nothing's happening at all," or I made such brief, frank answers as I would not have made to anybody else in the world. It was more my fault than hers that our Sunday afternoons were taken up with her affairs. I should have concluded that I was lucky, since I had no annals worth mentioning. And I should have had growing doubts about her and Kenneth Ellery, since the two of them certainly had an eventful history.

They were happy, dear God, Sophie, they were happy. They laughed so loudly in restaurants and

streets and department stores that other people turned around and stared. Nobody in the world had been given such privileges as hers: to wash away in one tide of love all the afternoon's bitterness; to make at least some return for the petty exasperations that her unworthiness was forever putting upon him; to lie with her head on his knee, looking up into his face; to pour his coffee, cut his meat, light his cigarette. She could feel her happiness moving like a nourishing liquid through her body. It warmed her and took away forever the cold that had always lain, only half-realized, at the marrow of her bones. Joy had made her prettier than she had ever hoped to be; it seemed a vain thing to say, but it was true; the eyes of others told her so. They flocked to her now as bees will flock to a ready flower—all the young men who used only to yank the back of her hair or smack her lightly as they passed. Somebody was always waiting to walk her across the campus; she became the subject of a piece of free verse and a sonnet; she received roses and telegrams other than his on her opening nights. And she had a way with her pursuers, a grave and gentle way that kept them off but did not break their pride. Unlike born beauties who laugh behind their hands at what they cannot use, she had known what it was to be turned away, and she was kind.

She was fortunate—really, Sophie, had any woman in love ever been as fortunate as she? How many people in this miserable world could take themselves off to an upstairs sitting room, with flowers in summer and an open fire in winter, a room so sacred to its owner that nobody would ever think of tapping on the door? Some-

times, when she had been lying for hours in the curve of his arm, completely serene but too happy to give way to sleep, sometimes she would think of the lovers who sat on cold park benches or walked back and forth among the statues in the Museum. Once, thinking of such matters, she had thought of Emmanuel, and strangely, still smiling, knew that her face was wet with easy tears. How did things go with him? Where did he take his new companion in New York? Was he happy? Was he fortunate? She hoped—so help her God—she hoped he was as happy, as fortunate as she. She was not in the least afraid of Ken's mother. Ken's mother was very gracious to her—gave her lace handkerchiefs and French perfume on her birthday, sent her home with armfuls of hardy lilies out of the garden, asked her to stay to dinner at least once a week. Yes, after her earlier experience with Mrs. Saltzman, she considered herself particularly fortunate in the cultivated consideration shown by Mrs. Ellery. But when I weighed these two mothers in the balance, I could not see that there was much choice between them. The Hebraic priestess with the virulent tongue—had she really been more indifferent to the little *shicksa's* fate than this reserved, remote lady who was willing to buy her sick son's pleasure even at the risk of falling out of a state of Presbyterian grace?

They were in love. Honestly, Sophie, she was ashamed to admit it, but everything they began, everything from a Shakespearean scene to a watercress sandwich, ended in love. How many poor devils were there who imagined, as she had once imagined, that they had

grasped and mastered love in a single encounter? No, Sophie, love wasn't like that. And when my belittling mood drove her into a corner and demanded definitions, she resorted to a simile. Love was like a musical instrument. Love was—well, say a tremendous harp strung between earth and heaven, swathed in mist, only half-visible to the uninitiate. You came upon it by chance; you put out your hand; you fearfully, tentatively touched a few of the visible strings, and then, driven off by your own terror or by the jealousy of angels, you turned and fled. But if you had a stout heart and a good companion, if you went back again and yet again, other even more exquisite strings began to reveal themselves in the dissolving mist. Then the two of you together made music—rhapsodic music without an end or a beginning, a never-finished music plucked from a never-ending multiplicity of strings.

It was strange and very fortunate that these flights of theirs were not interfering with her acting in the least. Love left them little time for work, but that made no difference: she could do twice as much these days in half the time. And even I, wary and sour as I was, had to admit that she was doing very well indeed. The admiration of her fellow students had mounted almost to awe; the directors praised her unreservedly, and she was seldom without an excellent part. She was lyric and tender as Irena in Chekhov's *Three Sisters*. She acted like a pert monkey as Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*. She impressed everybody, even Philip, with the poise and wit and vigor which she brought to Millament in Congreve's *Way of the World*. "You

know," I told her, "Philip was amazed at the progress you've made in the last couple of years." And she stuck out her tongue and told me to inform him that he'd get on faster with his mathematics, too, if he'd only relax and have a bit of fun for himself.

But one gloomy Sunday afternoon I found her chastened. Kenneth was ill, he had caught a severe cold in the November rain; he had been threatened with pneumonia, and the doctor had found him frailer than last spring—tense, excitable, plainly in need of rest. She had been down to visit him this morning, and he could scarcely speak above a whisper. They made up their minds then that they would be as quiet as a pair of field mice nested for the winter, as secure as though they had been married these last two and a half years. They sat on the sofa in front of the fire, with the black poodle stretched across their feet. They tasted life with such temperance as blooms only on the wild stalk of excess. They read the noble and restrained tragedies of Corneille and Racine. Ken was much better, he flourished on peace, and not for all the world would she have disturbed his quietness. She ceased to assert her right to her own interpretation of a line; she never went to the grill after rehearsal with one of the young men; when she was not working or spending the evening with him, she stayed at home, so that, if it should come into his head to call her, she would always be there. She held herself apart from the easy comradeship of the Prop Room and the Green Room. She behaved in every respect as though she were his wife, and no Spanish husband who had taken his bride from

a convent and placed her in a walled house with his maiden aunts could have had less cause for disquiet than he.

Yet there was no mention either of constancy or of marriage between them. Whatever she gave, she gave unasked, sensing, rather than knowing, what his sore self-esteem and his isolation required. She told me how, one afternoon when they were sitting in a coffee shop together, she completely lost her head and acted like a monkey. Why she had done it, God only knows, but she had taken the paper band from one of his cigars and slipped it onto the fourth finger of her left hand. He had fallen silent and stared at her, with such strange eyes. Pain, amazement, pity—all of them were in his look; she was ashamed to speak of it; whenever she thought of it, it was like a blow upon her heart. Certainly she did not wish to trouble or wound him. And God forbid that he should pity her or reproach himself. He owed her absolutely nothing. She had received a thousand times more than her deserts on that first day when he had said, "Come here a minute, will you, darling?" and had drawn her down beside him on the couch and kissed her on the lips.

No, she was completely happy—if only they had not quarreled so much. Last night they had wrangled shamefully in an Italian restaurant until two in the morning, and he was bound to be in wretched shape today, after so much violence and sour red wine and so little sleep. She had hurried out to him from her opening performance in the most coveted role of the year; she had taken unceremonious leave of the director and

the critic from the local newspaper; she had dressed and run straight for the door, without looking twice at her telegrams. Not that she regretted for a moment the people she had left behind. He and he only could tell her whether she was justified in her glowing conviction that she had created a consummate Juliet. But what had he said? Only that she had not yet learned to keep her stomach in, and had better brush up on her tenth speech in Act II, scene ii, since she had transposed two lines and completely muffed a third. For the next hour, in the cab and over the ravioli, he had expatiated exclusively on the commonplace acting of Romeo and Mercutio, and had even implied that any half-decent performance would stand out in comparison with theirs. For a while she had listened with patience. Then, unable to release her disappointment in tears, she had answered him back, and had found herself quite unintentionally committed to a defense of the two boys, who were no friends of hers and were second-rate actors at best. One word had led to another. But how drunk, how miserably drunk she must have been to have accused him of refusing to speak of her performance because he was eaten up by professional jealousy. He jealous of her? If she was anything worth mentioning, it was only because he had made her so. He was jealous, of course, but not of her acting or the acting of anyone else. He was jealous only of the bodily soundness of those callow boys who were permitted by the terrible injustice of destiny to maul the lines that he would never speak again into a dark and attentive house. And the only comfort that she could have given had remained closed up within her. Even at

the last minute, when she had finally seen the source of his bitterness, some ridiculous sense of theatrical honor, some thoroughly irrelevant consideration for that mediocre pair of hams, had kept her from joining him in his abuse of their weaknesses.

Furthermore, I did her no favor by telling her that he was partly in the wrong. He was not at all in the wrong—neither on this occasion nor on any other. Why should he be expected to stifle his own wretchedness in order to give her a triumphal evening? She deserved no triumphal evenings and wanted none; she wanted nothing but the kiss of reconciliation that he would surely, surely offer her tonight. If I would only look back over the last few of their quarrels, I would see that she was the guilty one. The time she had taken the director's word above his as to the proper interpretation of a difficult scene, the time she had insisted on buying the unbecoming red suit, the time she had begged him not to go to Florida for a much-needed holiday—every one of those times she had been to blame.

I had seen the two of them wage minor battles a good many times, but their differences seemed childish and trivial to me, and I had decided long ago that they fought as kittens do, to exercise their lively spirits and to amuse themselves. They had been lovers for two years—it was the beginning of her final semester at the College of Fine Arts—before I found myself caught in the middle of a major engagement. One such experience was more than enough for me. After that, I never spent another hour alone with them in the mauve and pink sitting room.

Alexandra and I had gone downtown together after school with thirty dollars of Mr. Ellery's money and specific orders to buy a dress—something simple and soft, something that would set off a silver belt and a bunch of violets. We arrived at his house at four-thirty, in a state of ebullience that bordered on giddiness. We had found the right dress at \$28.50 almost at once; we had spent the remaining \$1.50 on blintzes and tea in a Jewish restaurant, and we had seen the winter breaking up under our eyes—icicles dripped on our heads, slush retreated and revealed thin green blades between the pavement and the curb, and all the florists' windows were crowded with tulips and daffodils. We let ourselves in at the front door—Mrs. Ellery never kept it locked in the afternoon—and ran through the reception hall and up the winding stair. We found him lying on the sofa before a dying fire, a fire that looked eerily pale in the spring sun. He had an open book in his hand, and the black poodle was stretched like a rug over his legs. He had been dreaming, and he greeted us with one of his kindly, absent-minded smiles.

We showed him our find, and he expressed his approval, but with a mildness that seemed to censure our buoyancy. She held the dress against her body and began to waltz around the room, back and forth among the little tables laden with flowers, wine cruets, and fruit.

"Do be careful, darling," he told her, raising his head from the sofa pillow. "You're likely to crash into one of those bottles and ruin your dress. Put it back in the box, like a good child."

With an air of wifely obedience, she folded it and laid it among the sheets of tissue paper. "I love it, I certainly love it, Ken," she said, stroking it once more before she put the lid down. "Shall I wear it when we go out to dinner tomorrow night?"

He made an almost imperceptible movement, which startled the poodle into whimpering. "Day after tomorrow, Lamb. We're not going out to dinner tomorrow night."

"No?" She came to the foot of the sofa, wringing her hands. "You're not sick, are you, Ken?" She stared gravely into his face.

"Honest to God, Chickie," he said, casting a glance of mock desperation in my direction, "this girl will make an invalid of me yet. Tell me, do I look as if I were about to perish? Fact is, I feel uncommonly healthy this afternoon."

"Then why aren't we going out to dinner tomorrow?"

"Because I can't. I have to go with somebody else. It so happens that I'm having a New York guest."

The flesh-colored curtains had been pushed back to let in the first of the spring, and she stood in a shaft of raw, ungentle sun. Her face had lost its precarious charm, had become what it had been at Mrs. Saltzman's kitchen table—the pinched face of a waif, with shifting eyes and colorless lips. "New York," she said. "New York is the only place you ever think about. From the way you talk, a person would think God lived in Times Square."

He lay secure in his patch of shadow, soothing the

uneasy dog, fondling its ears with his left hand. He did not reprove her. He usually laughed at her small, ironic sallies, and I suppose he considered it punishment enough that he should refuse to smile at her feeble *mot*.

"Sometimes I wonder how the human race managed to exist before New York was invented. Sometimes I wonder how the Egyptians and the Greeks and the Romans——"

"Egyptian gentlemen who lived in Memphis," he said, "probably annoyed their young women no end by importing friends from Thebes. I assure you, my darling, the dilemma in which you find yourself at the moment is as ancient as the pyramids. It has always existed, and people have always managed to survive it. You'll survive it. Go home, study your lines, have a couple of good nights' sleep, and we'll have dinner together at the Ramsay on Wednesday night."

"And what makes you think I'll stay at home and study?"

"That's what you usually do, isn't it?"

"Maybe, but only because I——" Her mouth, bloodless in the pale light, began to tremble. She shamed me by making a sudden movement, humble and childish: she bent down and laid her hand across his feet. "Listen, Ken, is it a man, the one who's coming to see you?" she said.

He tilted his head backward and gazed at the ceiling. "A woman, Lamb. A veritable old hag of a woman—ancient—forty at least. You know how old *I* am, and she's even a little older than I. But she has a *je ne sais quoi*, and she's dear to my senile heart because she

played Jessica when I played Bassanio—back in the dark ages, all of ten interminable years ago.”

“Ken, couldn’t I——”

“She has a kind of faded charm, darling, a kind of soft, blurred, out-of-focus charm that will be grateful to my aging eyes. She’s not a great actress. The world has never been known to gasp at her entrances and sigh at her exits. But that’s all right, that’ll relieve me, for a whole evening, of the sometimes-just-faintly-burden-some necessity to gasp and sigh. We’ll spend a quiet day together, we two old failures. We know what the theater is—I’ll not be wounding her feelings if I happen to allude to the garbage pile under the roses. And, since both of us are beyond the expectation of miracles, neither of us will feel that he has grounds for annoyance if twelve hours go by without a miracle.”

I sat on the silvery hassock, between the sofa and the wan fire, telling myself that I ought not to witness such a scene as this, but I could not bring myself to move. I was held static in the role of a spectator, partly by the brilliance of Mr. Ellery’s talk and partly by a strange feeling that this was not a quarrel at all. I thought of it as a “scene,” but not in the sense that it was “an ugly scene between a man and his mistress.” It was, or it should have been, happening at a distance, on a stage. I stared without disquietude at his unembarrassed, faintly smiling face, and I thought with admiration that actors are magnificently skillful in the business of hurting each other, that actors can probably hurt each other more exquisitely than any other class of lovers in the world.

I think that he must have sensed the "audience reaction" issuing out of me. He had certainly said more than enough—she was wringing her hands at the foot of the sofa—and I am sure that, if I had not been there, he would have held his peace. Before he started in again, he turned his head slightly, presenting me, not with his glance, but with his beautiful Greek profile. Now his voice was more incisive and his rhythm more measured than before. "I am overcome," he said, "by an irresistible desire to immerse myself in the warm and murky ocean of my own failure. I desire—oh, my God, how ardently I desire—to sink for twelve hours into the calm of my mediocrity. Therefore, my Lamb, my little Eleonora Duse, bright vessel of God's intent, even at the risk of repeating myself, let me advise you to go home and study your lines and have a couple of good nights' sleep. I'll see you day after tomorrow. Tomorrow I am otherwise engaged. As I mentioned earlier, tomorrow I am spending the day with a lady from New York."

His silence released me to look in her direction. I was appalled by her plainness and her utter lack of dignity. To look as she looked, like a beggar clasping the feet of an unwilling donor, was shameful enough. But to say what she said, to ask him, after all that, "Please, Ken, let me come, too. . . ."

"Really, Alexandra, you're acting like a five-year-old. Isn't she, Chickie? Isn't she acting like a child?"

"Sophie, you keep out of this. I tell you, Ken, I'm going to come, too."

"You're going to do nothing of the kind, my sweet."

Really, if you continue this sort of nonsense, you'll convince me that I'm having a clandestine affair with the woman, and I'll feel unfulfilled until I've pulled her into bed."

"No!"

I started up from the hassock, because the word had come out of her mouth in a cry.

"Alexandra, you're behaving in execrable taste. You're shocking Sophie. You're——"

"I won't stay home and study my lines. Don't you think for a moment that I will. I haven't gone out with anybody, I haven't shown my face in the grill for the last two years, but tomorrow night I'll——"

"By all means, do, my dear girl."

"I tell you, Ken, I'll——"

"Yes, do, by all means. Have I ever once, even by an indirect word, even by a gesture or a grimace, suggested that you confine your activities to this—this. . . ." He gesticulated in a splendid theatrical fashion, sweeping his left hand down the length of his prostrate body and swinging it violently from the wrist; and that motion was eloquent of two opposites, of incurable self-loathing and unquenchable pride. The poodle jumped yelping from the sofa and cringed under the coffee table. As for Alexandra, her face twitched and wrinkled and became the face of a monkey. Her chin sank against her collarbones, and she wept.

"I hope you two will excuse me. I've got to go home for supper," I said.

"Wait just a minute, will you, Chickie? As soon as Lamb has wiped her nose, she'll go along with you."

She turned, rubbing the tears from her cheeks with the back of her hand, and walked toward the door.

He sat up and said in a tender, earnest voice, "Just a second, darling, you've forgotten your dress."

"I don't want my dress."

He reddened. "All right. Just as you please. You'll take it on Wednesday night."

"I won't come back on Wednesday night."

"I think you will." He paused and waited until she was crossing the threshold. "At any rate, I hope you will, dear heart."

She swung around then, with joy in her wet eyes, and ran back to him. She knelt on the floor, her face on his knees, her hands clasping his feet. "Forgive me, please forgive me, Ken," she said. "It isn't that I want to make trouble. It's only that I'm horribly jealous, so jealous that I think I'll die of it, but that's my worry, not yours, I'll take care of that myself. Only forgive me, just say you forgive me. I'll stay at home, of course. Not because you want me to. Only because that's what I'd rather do. If I'm not with you, I don't want to be with anybody else. I'll go to bed early tonight and tomorrow, and I'll study my lines, and I'll put on my beautiful dress on Wednesday and see you in the lobby, the way you said. And I'll never make such a scene again, never, Ken, so help me God."

I walked around the back of the sofa toward the door. She did not move, and I went slowly across the hallway, to give them leisure for their customary embrace. But they were very long about it, and, at the bend in the stair, I could not help turning and casting a sur-

reptitious glance back into the room. He was sitting upright. She leaned on one of his knees, and the black poodle, come out of hiding, stood with his forepaws on the other. I remembered the Prop Room then, the hollow sound of the hammer, and her voice saying, "I wish I could sleep across the bottom of his bed all night." And I hurried down the steps, eager for the street and the bright icicles, eager for any image that could blot out the passionate, doglike, abject shining of her eyes.

How did it end? All through these winter months I have been hounded by my vision of an avenue of meager trees, so sparse and open that the mind flies through them like a bird into the blankness of the empty sky. These days my house is very quiet after supper. Who should come to visit me? I, Sophie Littman, such a good, sensible girl, have thrown away my years on a fool's investment. I range through the kitchen, the dining room, the parlor, searching as if I might come upon remembrance among undusted books or behind toppling pots and pans. "Can't you sit down for half an hour?" my husband says, in the sort of annoyance that comes out of stifled pity. "I tell you, it's over and done with. Let it alone."

"Philip, can you by any chance remember the night we saw her do Ophelia at the School Theater?"

If he indulges me for once, it is either because he sees a way to make a point or has a nagging need to return to his book. "Yes," he says. "We walked around during intermission and heard two of the directors tell-

ing each other that Alexandra was doing almost too good a job of going mad. The people we know seem to have a tendency to go off in the head. Give a little thought to Talbot and Talbot's sister and Alexandra and your uncle Moisha. In fact, since it runs in your family, give a little thought to yourself."

I give no thought to any of it. I am sitting in the third row center, in the small and tasteful theater, all pale wood and faded tapestry, where she has been glorious and reasonably happy these last four years. Even though this is the opening performance of the Drama Department's *Hamlet*, rumor has seeped out of the rehearsals and trickled across the city. Something as rare as the blooming of a century plant is going to happen here, and other watchers have hastened before me across the clipped green April campus. In front of me and behind me they are saying that Willie Connerth is good enough as Hamlet, and handsome, of course. But really the person to watch for is the Hill girl. Remember her as Irena, Beatrice, Juliet? Well, the word is that her Ophelia tops them all.

But where is Mr. Ellery? No matter how early I have arrived at the School Theater in the past, he has been there before me, sitting in the aisle seat in the fifth row. That seat is now occupied by a woman whose aspect is hateful to me because I have been trying to stare it out of existence—a big-faced woman whose hat is topped with aggressive green feathers.

The lights go down on a packed auditorium, but even in the group of late-comers edging toward the least desirable seats I can see no sign of Kenneth Ellery.

"He isn't here," I whisper close to Philip's cheek. Then we draw apart and look at the bleak platform before the Danish castle. I do not give a damn what Francisco and Bernardo are saying; one star has been cut out of the curtain of night, and I try to compose myself by staring at that one star.

I find it downright annoying that the Drama Department has settled upon *Hamlet* this term. I am sick of *Hamlet*—saw it done here at the College of Fine Arts five years ago, watched Barrymore's astounding performance at a somewhat earlier date, and spent a tedious semester in high school turning every significant passage inside out. I see no reason for giving undivided attention to the stage while Alexandra is not on it, and Alexandra's appearances are so brief and few that I feel myself unduly put upon. The dramatic illusion is broken, too, because I know so many of the actors. Willie Connerth is no stricken Danish prince to me. He is a comely blond boy in black hose and doublet; I have seen him smack Alexandra's backside; I have read the free verse which he has written about her; and I know that he has twice sent her roses. And, while he rants over the frailties of the Queen his mother (an ash-blond beauty whom I saw sweeping the stage in her freshman days) I cannot listen—I can do nothing but draw futile and disquieting comparisons between him and Kenneth Ellery.

Then the curtain sweeps aside again, and we are in a room in Polonius's house—a gay little room with sunlight slanting down on tapestry, a carved chair, and

a small table bearing fruit, a decanter, and an open book. Even if I did not have the play almost by heart, I would know by the stir around me that she is about to come on; and she enters in a pale gray dress trimmed in ermine, her hair lying close to her head in one shining piece, her hand small and white in the brown hand of her brother Laertes. Is it my love for her or is it some alchemist's magic in her movements that transmutes the picture into the reality? One phrase uttered in that flawlessly modulated voice of hers, and I cannot choose but listen to every word. And, listening, I blush, for I know that Laertes is at best an amiable and shallow fool, and the advice that he tosses so complacently into her mobile, suffering face is precisely that which I myself have been reading her these last three years. Archaic, efflorescent, and much more eloquent, of course. But in its essential meaning the same:

“‘For Hamlet, and the trifling of his favor,
Hold it in fashion, and a toy in the blood,
A violet in the youth of primy nature,
Forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting,
The perfume and the suppliance of a minute;
No more.’”

She gives him just such a sidelong glance as she turned on me that evening when she made the rock and I sat on Madame Ranevsky's sofa pillow. There is in the tilt of her head and the lift of her light hands the faintest hint of the pert simian foolery which followed the departure of Emmanuel. “‘No more but so?’” she

says, partly in mockery and partly in regret. And I am assailed by the old shame that the private wound should be publicly exposed, that the secret moment should be reenacted on the stage, that art should be drawn up, still hot with blood, out of the lacerated heart. I sense, by the stiffening of an arm alongside my own, that Philip also is affronted by the intrusion of Alexandra's love affair into a Shakespearean tragedy. Later he will not be able to tell her how exquisitely she moved back and forth between her father and brother, how perfectly she observed the nuances and the rhythms, with what consummate skill she kept the balance between a woman's sophistication and a child's naïveté. And I am harassed by the knowledge that in following scenes she will give Philip even clearer cause for offense; he will not see Ophelia going mad for love of Hamlet; he will see Alexandra losing what little reason she ever possessed over a meretricious and fantastical ass named Kenneth Ellery.

In the first few minutes of her only scene alone with Hamlet, something happens to her which is considered a dreadful business, a stage calamity. She is sitting on a long stone bench before an arras, with a book in her hand; and Willie Connerth, not ten paces apart from her, is grimly grinding out the "‘To be or not to be’" soliloquy. There is nothing in his delivery to refurbish these worn lines, and I beguile the dull moment by studying her face. I see with fright that her eyes are wandering, that her chin is lifted, that her glance is being focused—God help her!—on the aisle seat in the fifth row where the big-faced woman

flaunts green feathers in the dim and dusty light. She starts as if somebody had touched her on the nape of the neck; an expression which has nothing to do with "‘To be or not to be’" twitches the corners of her mouth and widens her eyes. And yet the incident is so slight and brief that I know she is not learning of Mr. Ellery’s absence for the first time. It is not surprise that shatters the assumed identity; it is the recurrence of an old, expected pain. The look on her face is the same look I have seen on my mother’s face these many months, when she straightens above the washtub or the sink and presses her hand to her side. Willie Connerth turns to address his beloved too soon. He moves in her direction, with a companionable warning in his young blue eyes, saying,

“‘Soft you now!

The fair Ophelia! Nymph, in thy orisons
Be all my sins remembered.’”

Somebody behind me remarks in a whisper how beautifully they play to each other; but I know that, except for a certain technical mastery of interchange, they are not in contact at all. When she says,

“‘My lord, I have remembrances of yours,
That I have longed long to redeliver;
I pray you, now receive them,’”

she is not returning a jewel box to Hamlet. She is laying a heap of pigeon-colored suits and dresses, a string of raw coral, and a frosty pin at Ken Ellery’s feet. Holding

her roughly by the shoulder, poor Willie Connerth inquires as to her beauty and her honesty, and is either too much of an actor or too little of a man to see the irony. The words of that magnificent diatribe fall uncomprehended from his mouth—all save “‘I did love you once,’” which he delivers with a boy’s naked bitterness. Then the audience leans forward, waiting for her “‘Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so.’” She does not disappoint them. In those few words, softly said, there are many solemn meanings—the affirmation of the dream in the face of reality, the inner dignity that survives the outer disgrace, the belief in the wholeness and goodness of the past, even when the present mocks it—that, and more than I can fathom, much, much more. . . . I listen to Willie Connerth’s next speech only because it seems to have some terrible, incomprehensible bearing on Kenneth Ellery: “‘You should not have believed me; for virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish it; I love you not.’” Then into complete quietness, she drops the line which I will hear again and again for the rest of my days, the simple, stricken line:

“‘I was the more deceived.’”

Even at the moment I am undone by it. Tears start down my cheeks.

So far as I am concerned, the climax of Hamlet is over. I have spent all I own on it; in fact I have spent a good deal more than I knew I possessed. In the following scenes I am a remote, dry-eyed observer, and

such observations as I make are clinical and cold. I note, at the beginning of the scene in which there is a play within the play, that Ophelia is acting like a monkey. Her pert, flighty manner delights the audience, and once they burst into applause. But I am not as pleased as they—this guise of hers “*is miching mallecho; it means mischief*”; I have seen it to my sorrow before. And I am still more disquieted when I see how smoothly this quaintness slips into unequivocal madness. In Act IV, scene v, she strews her flowers with just such light, fluttering hands as knotted and undid the green and yellow Paisley scarf; she sings her bawdy songs in just such a voice as once chanted questionable limericks in French to the boys who worked on crew. Philip sits motionless during the mad scene. Now it is he who is moved in spite of himself. When she runs childishly up to thrust her fennel, columbines, rue, and daisies into the hands of the others, when she sings, “‘And will he not come again?’” when she departs, making a distracted curtsy at the door and asking God to have mercy on all good Christian souls, he chews on the corner of his lip. But I cannot rejoice in this late and grudging sign of approval. I can only ask myself what I will have to cope with, after the play, in the dressing room. I do not even try to wring words of commendation from him when we walk out, for the final intermission, into the hall.

A queue has formed at the water-cooler, and we tag along at the end of it. Some five feet ahead, two of the directors are talking to each other—the elegant, gangling man and an equally elegant Juno of a woman,

who keeps smoothing her knot of black hair with a strong, veined hand. They speak quietly, but in the distinct diction of theater folk, and we cannot choose but hear their every word.

"She's wonderful. Tonight she's simply wonderful," says my friend the lanky director, wiping his bald brow with his handkerchief.

"She has me worried, though. You noticed that perfectly obvious lapse during the big soliloquy?"

"All right, darling, of course I saw it. But, my God, that business before the mummers come on! And that mad stuff—all that marvelous mad stuff with the hands and the flowers!"

"Oh, don't get me wrong. I think it was a magnificent performance. But I never knew her to come out of character like that, and it made me think she may be putting too much of herself into the part."

"What's the matter? Him?"

"He isn't in the audience tonight."

"Why not? Why in the devil would he cut opening night?"

"I don't know. She didn't offer to talk about it, and it really isn't our affair."

"Not ours, and nobody else's, apparently," he says, turning with a paper cup in his hand to finish his observation in spite of the evident annoyance of the fat gentleman behind him. "She might as well have been born a cockroach for all the discipline she gets. Well, thank God, she's wiry. She'll survive it."

"I hope so, dear. I certainly hope she will. I wish I

were as sure about these things as you are. Myself, I don't quite know."

They have their drink of water and move off, silent and with solemn faces; and Philip begins to talk very fast about the fact that he won't be going up to Jersey this year—he'll be taking a summer course in accounting instead.

Now that we are back in our seats for Act V, I consider the necessity of watching the rest of the play an intolerable burden. True, there are only two scenes in this final act; but in one of them she will be carried on as a corpse, and in the other she does not appear at all. And in the course of that catastrophic last act, I am moved only by six of the dying Hamlet's lines—lines which always seemed empty and rhetorical to me in the past:

"O good Horatio, what a wounded name,
Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me!
If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
Absent thee from felicity a while,
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,
To tell my story.'"

After that, nothing concerns me in the least—not Fortinbras and the English ambassadors, not the dead march and the exeunt with the corpses. Even the repeated curtain calls give me no gratification, since they are only delaying my getting out of the place. On my way up the crowded aisle I run into the stolid rear of

the big woman with the green feathers. And I hate her, I hate her with all my heart.

I go up alone. I always go up alone, and Philip always sits waiting for me on a flight of stone steps outside. In these last three years I have come to know the shadowy, labyrinthine way to her dressing room by heart. I suddenly realize that I will not have to climb these steep stairs again, that after this evening I am released forever from the obligation to tell whomever I crowd against in the narrow hall, "I certainly enjoyed your performance tonight."

And with that thought comes its successor: For her also this occasion is valedictory; this is the last opening night when she will appear in the accumulated veils of her glory before an audience that knows her and waits for her coming with something close to love. For the first time, as I put out my hand to draw aside the green curtain that covers the entrance to her little room, I am struck with wonderment at the senselessness of the whole setup. Why should she not remain among us? Why should we, who have known her as Irena, Milla-ment and Juliet, be denied the right to watch her mellow into Madam Ranevsky and see her, strong and gray in age, wailing as Hecuba over the ruined walls of Troy? Why should she have to go begging, naked of her hard-won trophies, in the offices of agents who will be stupid enough to imagine that they have seen her like a hundred times before? And, when I have pushed aside the curtain, when I have seen that thin face of hers with its precarious, transitory beauty,

I also am hot with anger that God should make his sole residence in Times Square.

She is sitting, still dressed in her burial garment, on a stool before a big mirror. She is tired, and there is no color in her face; her elbow is set among jars and boxes on the dressing table, and her cheek rests on her hand. In the folds of her robe and in her hair are a few of the paper flowers that the mourning Queen of Denmark strewed upon her. And I am profoundly troubled by those flowers, I cannot control myself, I must pick them from her and toss them into a dark corner of the room.

"I look terrible, don't I, Sophie?" she says.

"No. Fact is, you look beautiful. You looked beautiful all the time you were on stage."

"I mean I look sick."

"No, you don't."

"I don't actually feel as sick as I look, you know. I'm white in the face because I had to be dead so long."

"You were simply wonderful."

"I guess I was, but I don't know why. Honest to God, Sophie, I thought I'd never get through it. I thought I'd die. I had a kind of lapse—did you see?"

"No, of course not. How would I notice a technical thing like that?"

"I came out of character when poor Willie Connerth was doing his big soliloquy. I shouldn't have looked out there at that seat. I tried not to, but I did."

She stands up then and begins to undo the fastening at her throat. I hurry to help her—I know that she has released some freshman crew-girl for a date in

the assurance that I will be able to undo the complicated snaps and ties. My hands tremble against her neck, her back, her side. She catches my glance before I pull the voluminous lengths of white crepe up over her head, and I wait in silence for the crucial sentence. It comes late, after the damp white garment has been laid aside, when she is reaching for the skirt of her brick-red suit. She says in an unnaturally casual voice, "I guess you noticed that Ken wasn't in the audience tonight."

"Yes, I noticed. Have you been fighting again, you two?"

"No. . . ." She buttons her skirt up the side, tucks her blouse in at the waist, leans toward the mirror and dabs rouge onto her white cheeks. "No, he's gone."

"Gone? Where?"

"To New York."

"To New York? For good?"

She wheels round and faces me, blanched to the lips, her hands pressed to her temples, her eyes alive with suffering. "For good, Sophie? You don't think for a minute he'd go away for good?" She laughs—a short laugh deep in her throat, and picks up her wide leather belt and twists it over her wrist. "Don't be silly, Sophie, he wouldn't, of course. He just got restless, that's all. He wanted to see a play or two. He just went up to New York for a couple of days, a week at the most. Only, it's a pity—isn't it?—that he wasn't here for my opening night."

I am so appalled by the pain I have unwittingly inflicted that I cannot answer. I stare at her face, at the

reflection of her taut back in the mirror. I stare at her shaking hands playing with the belt, and I wonder how doctors must feel when their patients look searchingly at their averted faces. My mind has been running to doctors a good deal of late. My mother is going to see the doctor, next week or the week after, whenever she gets around to it, whenever there's not too much to be done around the house. Will she take up her scarf or the handle of her purse and twist it around her wrist like that? Will she say, So it's not cancer, doctor—only a tumor? And, if the humane liar tells her, No, my dear woman, certainly not cancer, will a milder diagnosis seem a blessing by contrast, a matter for nervous laughter and moist, merry eyes?

I find my voice at last. "Well," I tell her, "it's your own fault if I did think he'd gone for good. You make such a business out of everything, you get yourself all worked up, and then a person just doesn't know what to think. Where did you get those beautiful roses?"

"Not from *him*. He didn't send any flowers this time," she says, slipping into her jacket. "I never imagined for a minute that he would. He's out of town, he's busy—and it's a terrible waste of money to send flowers by wire. Those roses are from Willie Connerth. Aren't they nice?"

"Yes, they're awfully nice."

But I can see by the way she takes them up that she can scarcely bear to touch them—she holds them low, away from her face.

I try a different approach. "You know, I should think a person would be sufficient unto himself if he

could do the sort of thing you can do. I should think nothing else would matter much, if you could move an audience the way you moved that audience tonight."

She puts the lid on a jar of cold cream and blows at a film of powder. A strange, shifting smile changes the contour of her lips only. Her eyes are grave; there is remonstrance in them; they tell me not to turn aside, they demand that I look honestly upon the nakedness of things as they are. "You know perfectly well that I have one chance in ten thousand of doing on the stage what I did here at school tonight."

"Still, there's that one chance."

"It's exactly the way Ken said, that night when we ate the suki-yaki. The American theater is a shambles, a slaughterhouse. I'll be very lucky if I'm given a chance to play a sentimental bitch in a bedroom comedy."

"Nevertheless——"

I am saved from the need to choose between lies and silence by the fact that Willie Connerth puts his head in. "Hello, Sophie darling," he says. "Didn't I stink out loud in Act V? Nobody ever, not since Shakespeare put pen to parchment, has made such a pukey mess of the last act of *Hamlet*."

I want to tell him that it wasn't as bad as all that, but he is drunk on self-deprecation, and he chatters on for several minutes, tossing extravagant praise at Alexandra, informing me that she hasn't eaten a bite all day, suggesting that I'd better get that oaf of mine to buy her a thick steak and a drink. On being invited to join us, he refuses. "She doesn't want me, she's been

looking at me all day, the poor girl," he says, and kisses her on the forehead, and departs.

She pulls the light-cord, and the two of us go hand in hand out of the dark dressing room and into the wanly lighted hall. "Isn't that the damnedest song, the one I sing in the mad scene?" she says. And she sings it, walking a little ahead of me:

" 'Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's day
All in the morning betime,
And I a maid at your window,
To be your Valentine,
Then up he rose and donn'd his clothes,
And dupp'd the chamber door;
Let in the maid, that out a maid
Never departed more,' "

No, I was wrong, he had not left her for good. He returned once and twice and three times, to give her flowers, to offer her money which she refused, to go with her once more and yet once more to the Ramsay and the Japanese restaurant, to spend an ultimate afternoon with her in the mauve and pink room. I loathed him for dragging out the agony, for not being able to make up his mind, for turning the whole summer into a series of crises—one arrival and departure after another.

She was to have spent that summer on some sort of job. She was to have saved enough money to see her through a month or two of pavement-pounding in New York. I could not blame her for refusing to answer

any of the advertisements in the minuscule help-wanted columns of the daily press. She was plainly not strong enough for "GENERAL HOUSEWORK, \$5 WK. AND MEALS" and not skilled enough for "SHIRT IRONER, \$9.50 WK." Whenever I picked up the classified ads to look for something that might serve her purpose, a nursery rhyme ran through my head:

Goldilocks, goldilocks, wilt thou be mine?
Thou'lt not wash the dishes nor yet feed the swine.
Thou'lt sit on a cushion and sew a fine seam,
And feed upon strawberries, sugar, and cream.

It hadn't been so clever of him to stuff her with lobster and filet mignon—it hadn't been so damned clever in the long run. She had always been picky and erratic about food, and now the plain fare that her father could provide out of his shrunken earnings would not go down her throat. She grew pale with the heat, dull-eyed with lying in bed until eleven or twelve, thin with eating nothing but grapes, crackers, and cheese. The Friday nights when she ate at our house were the only times when she managed to put away a decent meal.

My mother was the one person who could talk sense to Alexandra. When any of the rest of us—her parents, the gangling director, or myself—dared to hint that her love affair was over, she cut the conversation off with dignified silence or elusive monkeyshines. But in my mother's presence she was always what she had been in our childhood: she sat on the floor near the sofa, keeping her hands folded in her lap and allowing her chin

to rest against her chest—a mute and dutiful child. We never sat on the little porch any more, even though it was roomier now, with my sisters and brothers old enough to go on dates and my father doing some late work in his own shop because he had had to take a day-time job in a department store. My mother needed the sofa, so we sat in the parlor to keep her company. We pushed up the heavy front window and stared out at the pale, hyacinth-colored sky, at the passage of a few pigeons, at the ailanthus boughs and the telephone wires. Sometimes Alexandra read poetry to us, chiefly the sonnets of Shakespeare. I noticed that she always skipped her favorite and mine—was it for my sake or for her own?—the one that ends with, “‘This thou perceiv’st which makes thy love more strong to love that well which thou must leave ere long.’”

We had been sitting like that one Friday evening when all of a sudden my mother heaved herself up on her elbow, as if she had left something burning in the kitchen, and took Alexandra by the shoulder and pulled her around so that she could look straight into her face.

“Tell me something, Alexandra. How long is he gone this time?”

I knew by the scared look in Alexandra’s eyes that she had not permitted herself to count the days. She counted them slowly, whispering and touching the tips of her fingers to her thumb, one after the other. “Three weeks,” she said. “Three weeks and two days.”

“Do you think he’s ever going to come back?”

“Maybe not.” Two tears spilled over her cheeks and

fell into the spread skirt of her cotton dress. "Maybe not, Mrs. Littman, I don't know."

"Doesn't your mother talk to you about it?"

"My mother lets me alone."

"Maybe you want that I should let you alone?"

She stared at my mother's face, white and flabby against a scarlet sofa pillow. She stared through the thick lenses at my mother's eyes, and told her, "Oh, no, Mrs. Littman, absolutely not, not at all."

"Listen, Alexandra, there's one thing I want to tell you. In this world——"

I looked up at my mother in terror because the unfinished sentence had come out of her mouth with the urgency of a last testament. She paused only long enough to nod at me—a brief, brusque nod which implied, It is so, and you will bear it, and whether you think you can bear it or not, it is so. Then she turned back to Alexandra, and I knew with amazement that I was not desecrating this moment by such a shameful and irrelevant feeling as jealousy. Where I was concerned, my mother need not worry. I had her strength and her gift for resignation; I was flesh of her flesh and bone of her bone. I would marry Philip, beget children, give them in marriage, and come to my death as she was coming to hers, strong and complete. But this other one, this speckled, specieless bird that had found its way into the nest might well remain shuddering after the mother's flight. . . .

"In this world," she said, "we shouldn't lie to ourselves. We should say to ourselves, There's a quart of vinegar to drink for every pint of wine."

"I know it, Mrs. Littman, only I——"

"Only you drink your vinegar too slow. Drink it and forget it. Tell yourself once and for all, He's gone, he doesn't want me anymore, even if he comes around and says he wants me back, he doesn't want me, it's another lie. When a man gets sick of a woman like he's sick of you, he'll never come back."

"No. . . ." She says it quietly, stroking my mother's hand. "Don't say 'never.' I would die if I thought he'd never come back."

"You'll not die, Alexandra. Nobody'll die except the ones whose time is come. You'll live like anybody else, and you'll forget it. When you're an important actress, you'll look back and laugh. Remember what I tell you and see if you don't."

Night had come down upon us. The heavy chairs and tables were obscured in shadow. In the square of fading sky beyond the open window hung the young moon, symbol of the new beginning or of the old, recurrent, unquenchable desire. Alexandra turned away from my mother's uncompromising gaze, and stared at the bright crescent crossed by three black wires.

"When I'm great. . . ." she said in a whisper. "He'll want me then."

"Don't be a fool. You won't want him. He'll be an old man. How old is he now?"

"I'd want him if he were a hundred."

"No, you wouldn't."

"I'll always want him. I'll want him even in my grave."

My mother fetched up a sigh that seemed to come out of her vitals. "Nobody wants anything in their grave."

"If there were another world, I'd wander around in it until I found him. If I were nothing but dust, the way I want him would still be there in the dust."

For a few seconds my mother's face grew stern and forbidding, and I felt that she was angered by this senseless desire to suffer everlastingly, this affront to the blessed blankness of death. "Alexandra!" she said in a cold, peremptory voice. Then the austerity of her face dissolved; she was still alive and could weep with the living; her eyes were wet and kind. "God!" she said in Yiddish to me over Alexandra's bent head. "What this child will have to suffer!" And it was between her and me as it had always been when, called to some other duty in the house, she laid a helpless little one across my knees.

Plainly, she was very tired. She lay back against the scarlet pillow and closed her eyes. Nor did she try to stop me when I went into the kitchen—proud in my grief and my wisdom—to light the gas-flame under the kettle of water for the tea.

Early in August Alexandra had a summons to appear in the office of the gangling director. He had a job for her, and a very good one at that. One of the summer stock companies playing the outlying towns was losing an ingenue, and the manager was desperate, was offering a hundred and ten a month. It was a chance to redeem a whole summer of dawdling. Let her pull herself together, put on some lipstick, board the inter-

urban streetcar, and report to the distracted manager at his office in such-and-such a town on such-and-such a street.

Oh, not today, she told the director, wringing her hands. She was sick, she had a terrible headache, she couldn't possibly take that long trolley ride this afternoon.

All right, tomorrow, then.

But tomorrow was Friday, and it was so ungodly hot, and surely she couldn't be expected to step in for a Saturday night show, surely they couldn't hope to use her until, say, Monday night.

All right, then, Saturday morning at eleven. It so happened that the stock company was putting on *The Doll's House*. She knew the play inside out and could spend the interim brushing up on her part. Such delays and objections as she was making now were, of course, the worst possible recommendations for an actress, and they could be excused this time only on the grounds that she was not entirely herself. But Saturday morning at eleven meant Saturday morning at eleven, not an hour later.

Not one hour later, so help her God.

She telephoned to tell me the news and to ask if I would lend her a pair of silk stockings for the forthcoming interview. I did not like her listless manner of passing on such good tidings. I felt that she needed a push in the back, and I offered to go downtown with her on Saturday and put her on the interurban car. "I'm really going, Sophie, honestly I am. I know it would be foolish to hang around any longer, waiting for him

to call. If you don't believe me, come over and watch me pack. I'm going to spend all day tomorrow studying the part, so I thought I'd get the packing out of the way tonight."

The evening turned out to be one of those ripe, radiant ones when the mist rises out of the rivers, lies in a cool film on your arms and cheeks, and blurs and magnifies the full yellow moon. The bareness of the boulevard and the avenues only made the massy foliage of the little residential section more luxuriant by contrast. Between the candy store and her front porch, I walked under an arch of buckeyes, honey locusts, and blossoming Indian toby trees. Behind the wire trellis, in the shadow of the clematis vine, Mr. and Mrs. Hill were sitting on the porch swing. Their hands and shoulders were touching, and it seemed strange and magical to me that they should sit like lovers after they had been married for twenty-five years. In the patchy light of the street lamp I could see Mrs. Hill's hair, gray now but still very soft and light, still held back from her forehead by a pin in the shape of a star.

"Hello. Is Alexandra inside packing?" I said.

"No, dear, I think she's out in the hammock in the back yard." The voice was feminine, remote, indolent. The swing continued to move. "Was she going to pack?" The question was addressed, not to me, but to the answerer of all her questions—the dark, manly presence at her side.

"Search me. She didn't say anything about it at the supper table. Make yourself at home, Sophie. Go on back and find out."

I went back through the narrow, earth-smelling alleyway and came out on the garden, where all the colors—the blue of the hydrangia blossoms, the faded lavender of the Rose of Sharon, the pink of the hollyhocks—had been bled by the moon to a uniform, silky white. She was lying in the hammock under the buckeye tree. Here and there, along the grass below her and in the heavy leaves above her, a few fireflies kept lighting up, like shooting stars. She wore—and I considered it a good omen—a certain white jersey dress which she had bought and saved in the hope of Kenneth Ellery's return. It was a loose-hanging, draped sort of dress, and now she was much too thin for it; still, it shone wherever the moonlight touched it, and it gave a milky, luminous cast to her face.

"Hello, Sophie darling." She let her arm drop over the side of the hammock so that her fingertips trailed in the grass.

The idleness of that gesture boded no good. "Come on, let's go in and pack and get it over with," I said.

"Wait, I want to tell you something." She swung around, set her feet on the grass, and walked toward me with slow steps and fixed, shining eyes. She looked exactly as she had looked on that Friday night when she enacted a resurrection in our dining room, and I stepped backward in fright.

"Nothing upsetting, Sophie, I assure you." Her voice was her own, but her face was the transported face of one who no longer has converse with the world. "Something glorious. . . ." She still advanced, and I still retreated, until, feeling the yielding earth of a flower bed

under my heels, I was forced to meet her face to face.

"For God's sake, will you pull yourself together?" I said.

"I don't have to pull myself together. There's no reason to pull myself together now. Listen, Sophie, he's sent for me."

Not again! My hate stood up and screamed at him, Not again! Let her alone, you cruel, weak, degenerate fool!

"He sent me a long letter. It came this afternoon. I'm going up on Monday on the early train. I'll see him, he'll be at the station, we'll eat dinner together on Monday night. He's gone into partnership with an agent up there—that's why I haven't heard from him, he's been so terribly busy. But now it's all right, he even found me a little part. I'm supposed to get a lot of sleep and make myself as pretty as I can and be ready for the reading when I'm called. He says——" She broke off, seeing unbelief in my face. She glared at me, reached into the front of her dress, and pulled out a handful of bills, tens and twenties, held together by a paper clip. "You don't believe me, do you? You think I'm out of my head. Well, he sent me a money order for all that. It's to pay for the ticket and the first month's rent and food. You don't throw that sort of money away on a woman you don't want anymore. He's learned his lesson, he'll never leave me now, you'll see!"

I deliberately withdrew my glance from the money and focused it on her wild eyes. "Show me his letter," I said.

She shrugged and tossed her head. "Later," she said

in an angry voice. "I don't have it here. I left it in the house. Besides, it wasn't meant for anybody else to see."

I knew then that I would never see it. If it had been a tender letter, she would not have left it in the house. If it had contained anything for her eyes alone, if it had even hinted at anything other than a weary lover's penitential offer of charity, she would have worn it between her princess slip and her breast.

She stood white and thin against the blackness of the buckeye tree, playing nervously with the paper clip, pulling at it until it came loose and five or six of the bills fluttered to the ground. Her hands felt after them through the grass, and I went cold with remembering the fennel, the columbines, the rue—all that mad stuff, all that marvelous mad stuff with the hands and the flowers. "Eighty, ninety, a hundred and twenty," she said. When she straightened, the wildness in her face had given place to a hard, equivocal smile. "Anyhow, I can say that he loves me more than a hundred dollars' worth. That's something, isn't it? Come on, let's sit down on the hammock. You're tired."

We sat in silence for about half an hour, rocking slowly in the hammock, breathing the smell of the damp earth, and watching the fireflies. A sweet immobility, a grateful sense of helplessness lay heavy upon me. Why should I wage one more futile battle with her on the eve of her going forth? Why should I alienate her with a string of useless words that might make it impossible for her to turn back to me in the inevitable hour of her disgrace? She was going away, no matter what I said—I looked at her out of the corner of my

eye and saw her stroke the crumpled bills—she was going away, and I was the more tender of her because the thought of her going left me singularly free of pain. Yet I could not blame myself. She was unearthly, we were estranged; and it was no great wonder if, for that half hour at least, I thought myself willing to exchange her for a little sanity, a little peace.

She is gone now, I am given my peace. She has left me alone to sit with my dying and to bury my dead. I scarcely think of her for weeks on end. There are too many other things to think about—the coal for the winter, my resignation to be handed in at the Board of Education, the difference between the cash in my purse and the bill at the butcher's, and hand-hemmed pillowslips, hidden at the bottom of the dresser drawer, which my mother was saving toward my wedding day. Now I postpone the marriage toward which I have been hastening. We must wait for a bed of our own until my younger sister is married, until my brothers have gone to work for my uncle in California, until my stricken father has roused himself enough to tune in on the radio news and to stop at a friend's house now and then for a round of pinochle. All this being accomplished, I am free. Because at such moments there is an upsurge of family feeling strong enough to drown the most obstinate anticlerical convictions, I am married by a mild young rabbi, who chants the Hebrew text self-consciously and then repeats it in impeccable English. I am married in a mouse-colored dress, with one chrysanthemum on my shoulder, on a Sunday afternoon

when the windows of our parlor are blurred by a driving rain.

Alexandra is not at my wedding. In the short and barren answer which she sent to my invitation, she said she was "kept on the spot by a very good prospect which is just about ready to materialize." I doubt it, I doubt it very much. So many of these very good prospects of hers have refused to become material at the last minute that I am convinced she has not come because she cannot afford the railroad fare. Still, she has sent us a very fine wedding gift, a Chinese ceremonial painting on a silk scroll, the only objet d'art in the collection of towels, sheets, glasses, casseroles, and dishpans. Late in the afternoon, when I wander into the bedroom, less to exult over my loot than to escape from the noise, I take up the scroll and look at the temples and the mountains topped with snow. How is it with her now? Her letters have been few and brief and proud; she has told me nothing, but I know that he has left her; I know that she pounds the pavements all day long and carries trays in a restaurant at night. I roll up the silk and lay it back among the other presents on the bed. I return to the dining room and drink a glass of vishnik. My weariness, the sense of an inexhaustible series of sighs pressing upward in my breast, the chatter, the fumes of the wine—all these drive her out of my head; and I do not think of her that day, nor the next, nor the next. . . .

Our correspondence grows thinner with the weeks; but I absolve myself, I tell myself that it is no fault of mine. What, other than trivialities, can be written in reply to trivialities? Months go by, and we write now

and then. A year runs out, and we do not write at all. . . .

Yet I see her once more; there is one more event before the avenue of sparse trees ends in utter emptiness. At the beginning of the second year of my marriage and the third of her exile, I find myself pregnant. In spite of Philip's admonitions, in spite of the fact that there is barely enough money for the two of us, my will to give birth, my will to life has asserted itself. And, very strangely, that will to life is inextricably bound up in me with a peculiar morbidity: I am never pregnant without imagining myself on the threshold of death. While the strange thing within me kicks its feet and beats with angry fists against the walls of my body, I say to myself—to nobody else, for who would believe me, looking at my glowing cheeks and my tawny flesh?—I say to myself that I will never survive the hour of delivery. I will never survive, and therefore I must put my house in order. I am going to die, and I heave myself up on my elbow, knowing that I have left something burning in the kitchen. Where is she now? Do I still have her address? Is she living in the same apartment? Would it be possible for a person to be swallowed up in that impersonal, gigantic city—moved away, nobody knows where, completely lost? And quickly, quickly now, before the burden is too heavy to drag up and down a dozen streets, a dozen flights of stairs, before the roll and jerk of a railroad coach can hurt the thing that will live and be perfect in spite of my annihilation, quickly I must go to look for her, to comfort her—God knows how—to make it possible for her to remember me without bitterness.

It will be hard to find her, I tell myself, looking out of a dirty coach window at one corner of a stricken nation—mills without fire, smokestacks without smoke, towns where nobody has painted a house or put up a new back fence these many years. Perhaps it will be impossible to find her, I think as I eat a dry American cheese sandwich in the company of an old lady who is blatantly interested in my condition. I must prepare myself for the time when, exhausted by a long round of pavement-pounding of my own, I have to admit that she is not to be found this trip at all. And if I fail? I ask myself, giving way to an irresistible surge of nausea in the ladies' room where everything is covered with blown black soot. If I fail, what then? Why, then I will write to her parents, who have moved away with a new branch of her father's company to a town whose name I cannot remember to save my soul. But I will remember, and I will write them, and they will tell me her address. Nobody ever gets lost like that; it is a nightmare as unreal—and as convincing—as my notion that my pregnancy will end in my death.

I come into New York at eight-thirty in the evening. A roar assails my ears, and I cannot tell whether it is the roar of trains underground or the roar of the city overhead. A red cap to carry my bag and show me the way would be an inexcusable piece of self-indulgence; so I follow the crowd that streams from the coaches, up a silver escalator, through a maze of passages lined with shops, between white-tiled walls marked with subway signs, up a flight of stairs, and into a great, domed, sounding place, where I stop to stare, amazed at so much

height, so many entrances and exits, so many preoccupied faces and hurrying feet. I no longer believe that I can find my own way to the address in the corner of Alexandra's last letter. The mere business of locating a cab is difficult enough—I walk around for ten minutes before I come out on a draughty ramp lined with waiting taxis, whose headlights pick out swirls of snow. I give the cabby the number on Thirty-sixth Street. "That's between Sixth and Seventh," he says. And when I step out among darkened show windows and solemn doorways, I have a bad conscience over a wasted quarter. I could have walked. I have been in the cab for less than three minutes, and most of the time, caught in a solid phalanx of cars and buses, we were standing still.

At first I do not see the doorway. It is set back a couple of paces from the façades of the adjoining shops; it is almost lost between two darkened windows in which I can make out heaped bolts of cloth. I find and open the door at last, and step into a warm, decent little hall. There is a brass plate with name-cards, one of which says, "HILL, ALEXANDRA, AND MARCH, TESSIE, 4-C."

It is a short-lived relief which I experience at finding her living in the same place; almost at once it gives way to chagrin that a person named Tessie March is also to be found in 4-C. I convict Tessie March, sight unseen, while I drag myself up the three steep flights of stairs. Tessie March—nobody was ever born with a name like that. She has changed it, of course. She has changed it from Esther Marcus or Bessie Markovitz. . . . My heart pounds, and my new maternity dress is damp with an outbreak of sweat. How can I offer comfort or grope

after reconciliation if an abominable stranger, who has no share in our past, is puttering around in the kitchen or lounging in the parlor? I am sick, I was foolish, nobody wants me, I should never have come. I ring the doorbell three times, hard, in my bitterness. And it is a stranger, whose name no doubt is Tessie March, who opens the door and stands between me and the empty, lamp-lit living room.

She is a handsome girl, of middle height, slender, built with the neat economy of a dragonfly. Her clear olive skin is stretched tight over the flawless bone structure of her face; her nose is long and narrow; and there is a kind of baleful luminosity in her hazel eyes. I know by the slight downy shadow above her upper lip and by her masses of black ringlets that she must have been called something like Theresa Marchesi at her christening. She wears a tailored housecoat of scarlet wool, and there is a broad copper bracelet just above her bony, exquisite wrist.

"Yes?" she says in the cold tone which years of national disaster have taught the hard-pressed to use toward the importunate wretches who are forever knocking on their doors.

"Does Alexandra Hill live here?"

"She does." The diction is theatrical. Her even, gleaming teeth are revealed by the studied movements of her lips. "She's out at the moment."

"When will she come home?"

The hazel eyes take me in, stopping first at my bag (Don't tell me we have to put you up for the night?), then at my waistline (In trouble, eh?), then at my

wedding ring (So it's a respectable married woman we're dealing with. *Excuse me!*). "Did you want to see her?"

"Yes, I do."

"Will you step in?" (Let's make the best of a bad situation.) "She ought to be back any minute. She usually comes between nine and nine-fifteen."

Her last sentence is far more wounding than her ungracious hazel stare. She knows too precisely the time of Alexandra's return. She waits for Alexandra evening after evening. On the blond wood coffee table she has set out a cocktail shaker and two glasses, as I would have set out two cups and saucers and a pot for tea. She has spread a dozen crackers with sharp cheese and laid them among radishes carved in the shape of roses. I stand in the middle of an old, sparsely furnished, but surprisingly pleasant room, and think to myself stupidly, Our Friday nights, our Friday nights. . . .

"Won't you sit down?" (I am the hostess here. The green drapes, the white Indian rugs embroidered with red and yellow birds, the blond wood coffee table, the chairs and sofa covered in light gray rep—they are mine.) "Why don't you sit in the big chair? You look tired." (Yes, and pretty messy, too, with the train soot in black rings around your eyes.) "I'm Tessie March. May I ask your name?"

It is my unmarried name that comes out of my mouth. Did I intend to hurt her with it? "Oh, yes," she says, ranging around the room with her scarlet housecoat spreading behind her, "Alexandra has mentioned you." And I see that the past can be almost as painful to the present as the present is to the past. But

now she is aware that I cannot be shoved out as an intruder; I must be accepted as a guest. She takes my wraps and bag, leads me to a long bathroom lined with cracked white tiles, hands me a towel, a washcloth, and a fresh cake of soap, and tells me in an entirely inhospitable voice that I am to make myself at home. When I come out, cleansed and refreshed and smelling strongly of lavender soap, she is sitting on the floor in front of the coffee table, her elbows on her knees, her chin supported on her brown, bony fists. "Your ankles are swollen," she says in the clipped, cold accents of one who delivers a reprimand. "Why don't you take off your shoes?"

"No thanks, I'm very comfortable. When will Alexandra be here?"

"She should have been here fifteen minutes ago. Really, you'd feel much better if you'd take off your shoes."

I realize that she is actually concerned about my throbbing feet. Probably she herself has beat out innumerable miles on the sidewalks. I untie the laces of my oxfords, ease out of them, and set them neatly under my chair. Her face is lighted, only for an instant, by something like a smile.

I seize the opportunity to ask for such information as should have been freely offered half an hour ago. "Does Alexandra have a job?"

"Yes, she has a job." She stands up, turns her back to me, and begins to rearrange the objects on a little mahogany what-not—two brass candlesticks, a redwood box, and a photograph in an ornate gilt frame.

"What's Alexandra doing?"

The lean back stiffens. I wait, and in the uncomfortable silence my eyes are drawn by the photograph. It is such a picture as should not be stared at—a picture of a withered old woman, her toothless mouth sucked inward, her pierced ears dragged down by two gold loops. I want to look away and cannot; and when Tessie March turns around and sees me staring, I feel myself grow red.

"Alexandra," she says, in precise and measured syllables, "is working in a restaurant for the time being."

"Hasn't she had a part lately?"

"No, she hasn't had a part. As a matter of fact, she's never had a part. They're fools, nothing but god-damned fools. . . ." The muscles of her throat tighten. Her rage soars over my head and flies in the face of all the world. "What do they care about genius? They won't give her a chance at anything decent, and she's not pretty enough for their cheesy parts." She stops short, turns the picture around in my direction, and steps aside so that I may see it. (Are you curious? Do you want to get a better look? Go ahead, then, gape your fill.)

"Is that your mother?"

"No, my grandmother. She came over from Italy. She made lace and peddled it from door to door—bedspreads, doilies, centerpieces, tablecloths. We were orphans, the five of us. That's the way she made our living. I was the only girl, and she left me two thousand when she died."

I force myself to look her straight in the eye, and

I see under the rage a glow of loyalty and tenderness. "I never saw my grandmother," I tell her. "She died during a famine in a Polish village. She was Jewish, of course. I have a picture of her, a little tintype. Her ears were pierced like that, and she wore the same kind of gold rings."

"Have you had your dinner?"

"Yes, thank you, I had dinner on the train."

"Would you care for a drink, or do you want to wait for Alexandra?" She falls silent, suddenly alert and static, like a dragonfly poised in mid-air. I hear advancing footsteps, and know with a pang that she has heard them before me, that time and custom have given her the better listening ear. "Well, we won't have long to wait, at that," she says. "She's coming now."

The door opens without the grating of a lock. "Hello, Tessie darling." The voice, the inflection of devotion are those that I have heard at the door of my mother's house, beside the plaster statue of St. George, in the school yard under the Indian toby tree. How is it possible that another name should take the place of mine? "I'm terribly sorry I'm so late. Really, I hurried. It's only because I——" She is in the room now, shockingly thin and white. My heart stands still as I meet her unbelieving, unwelcoming eyes. The child within me turns, in protest against my long forgetting, kicking against my side. "My God—Sophie?—not Sophie?" she says, and makes a face like an ancient monkey, and weeps.

She bends over and embraces me. There is melted snow on her cheek, and—in spite of the blurred neon

signs of the strange city showing through the window, in spite of the fact that Tessie March is standing beside her with one impatient hand outstretched to take her coat—I catch a breath of the past in the old scent of apples and snow. But when she straightens I can no longer deceive myself: she is grievously changed, changed in her person and changed toward me. Her hair has been cut like a medieval page boy's, curled inward around her shoulders and plastered in a flat bang across her brow. The whiteness of her face is intensified by the harsh, bright red on her lips. Now that her coat is off, I see that her bones are painfully obvious, thrusting against the black stuff of her dress. She blows her nose, rubs her eyes, and refuses to look in my direction. She goes straight to a mirror on the other side of the room and smooths her hair. "I look dreadful, don't I, Sophie?" she says. "But I don't always look quite as bad as this, do I, Tessie? It's only that I've been on my feet since four o'clock, and that always makes a person white in the face."

"All you need," says Tessie, "is a couple of drinks."

She nods in answer, walks to the coffee table, and picks up a radish. "They're awfully pretty—aren't they?—cut this way like roses. Anyhow, black is my worst color. I'd like to throw this dress away. I will—if I ever get another one to take its place." Suddenly she spits a piece of the radish into her hand and has a coughing fit. "I sound as if I have t.b., don't I? Well, I don't. I've been checked by a doctor—Tessie made me go—and a case of bronchitis is all that's the matter with me."

"Nothing's the matter with you. You'd feel better if you'd have your drink. You're cold."

"All right, Tessie, I'll have a drink. Only, you need to bring another glass for—yourself."

Tessie goes out to the kitchen and leaves us alone, but Alexandra will not look at me. She keeps the coffee table between us and plays with the radishes and crackers, pushing them into more regular circles on the plate.

"Alexandra——"

"Whatever are you doing in New York, Sophie?"

I must have possessed some foreknowledge of the wretched state of affairs in which I would find myself; I must, without knowing it, have provided myself with the necessary lie. "I came up to look at some cloth for my father. He's very busy and couldn't get away. Since I was here anyway, I had to drop in to find out how you are."

At last she lifts her chin and lets me see her eyes. The stare which she gives me is at once stricken and proud, bold and afraid. "I manage. With Tessie's help, I get along all right," she says. "You remember that time when Ken sent for me? Well, he didn't want me back. He only wanted to give me a hand, just the way you said."

I recall distinctly that I said nothing of the sort. But there is no time for argument, and I ask her dully, "Where is he now?"

"I don't know. Maybe here. Maybe in Hollywood. It doesn't matter. I never see him any more. I——" A cupboard door bangs shut in the kitchen, and she says in haste, "Listen, tell me, are you and Philip happy?"

I often wonder, I often want to know if the two of you. . . .”

It suddenly occurs to me that she has not noticed I am pregnant. The other one, the stranger who is coming through the doorway with a cocktail glass in her hand, has taken cognizance of the most important fact in my existence. But this one, closer to me than my blood-sisters, has cast such a languid and shifting look over my person that she has not even been conscious of the change.

“I guess we’re as happy as most people are,” I tell her. And Tessie seems to be annoyed even at this impersonal sentence. She marches to the coffee table and pours out our cocktails with the air of a headwaiter who is present for service and nothing more.

I do not want the cocktail. I never drink liquor, I have my difficulties with a single glass of wine. But now that I have sanctioned the journey to the kitchen, I must accept the proffered glass; and, as the feeble conversation limps along, it is Tessie that I blame for the loathsome taste of the gin and the droll, undisciplined rolling of the olive, for the intermittent blur in front of my eyes and the thin whine in my head. Is it to appease her that Alexandra begins to spin out the story of their meeting? She spins it out slowly, in a tired voice, her head tilted against the high back of the gray wing chair, her eyes half closed. She tells, with certain interruptions from Tessie—who stands behind the cocktail table and spreads more cheese on more crackers—how it all began. . . .

That part in the play—you know, the one she came

up here to read for, the one Ken Ellery wrote to her about—she decided not to take it after all. . . .

I shudder against the disgusting aromatic taste and against the knowledge of what must have passed. She is a fool, she was always a fool. She weeps and begs and clutches like a falling cat. And then, at the last moment, she thrusts away the right to work, the right to eat, in the false notion that by refusing charity she can save her irredeemable pride.

She decided not to take it, and Tessie March was reading for it, too. Tessie and she were running neck and neck, and——

Not at all, says Tessie, passing me the cracker plate. Anybody could see that there was no comparison between Alexandra's genius and any minor talent she herself might have. But, at the last minute, when Alexandra had the part, Alexandra turned around and walked out on it. Walked out on it and furnished Tessie March with such a break as happens once in twenty years. That break had led to others, and the money kept coming in. It was sheer stubbornness, this business of working as a waitress, there was always room for two in a dump like this. If there was to be any talk of gratefulness—which God forbid!—it was she, Tessie March, who was grateful. And, in her gratefulness, she puts aside the cheese knife and lays her brown hand on Alexandra's thin, chapped hand.

Is it the strength of the second cocktail or my pain at being forced to witness their loyalties that makes me break in? I say in a voice not quite my own that Alexandra looks ill, was always frail, should not be carrying

heavy trays. Couldn't she find some lighter kind of work?

"Really, Miss Littman, as I just finished saying, she doesn't have to take *any* sort of job."

"No, actually, Sophie, I don't. It's only that I'd rather be working than sitting around here all day."

"There's no point to this discussion, anyway. She's getting a job—a real theater job—in a week or so."

"A real theater job?"

"Yes, Sophie, honestly." Tessie has moved back to the crackers and cheese, and I can see Alexandra now, can see a wan brightness in her face. "You've heard of the Federal Theater here, haven't you, Sophie? I've applied, and they're going to take me. You know—it's part of the WPA."

I know that I am drunk; my eyes are wet. My heart has gone soft, and I am weeping as children weep when they hear martial music and see flags going by. I am shedding tears of admiration and gratefulness over the hero who has gone out against our poverty and our wretchedness—he who will conjure smoke from the smokestacks and bring paint to the dilapidated fences, he who has gathered the young wanderers under the tents of the CCC and will find room for the rejected in the projects of the WPA. But she does not understand either that I am drunk or that I am weeping at the foot of a new pedestal. She thinks my tears are for her, and she takes a ball of a handkerchief out of her pocket and rubs her eyes. "Tell me, Sophie darling, how is Philip? Is he still the same?"

"I guess he's pretty much the same. He's crazy about

chess. He works in the liquor store all day and plays chess half the night."

"Oh, give him my love. And Ruth, Ruth Peterson—where's she?"

"She's in Persia, working with an archaeologist, which is just as well, because she got to be an awful bore."

"And Andrea Viccini—how's Andrea Viccini?"

I weep at the misery of existence. "She married that man of hers and has two children already. They're dirt poor and terribly proud. She won't come near any of us any more."

"Remember Emmanuel, Sophie? You know, we went to a concert, Tessie and I, and there, up near the front of the first violin section—there was Emmanuel. He looked all round and rosy. He's done wonderfully well for himself. Do you remember a dress I had, the blue one with the forget-me-nots? The yellow eyes fell out—do you remember?—all the yellow eyes."

Through the fumes of the drink, I can see her dancing, the skirt of the blue dress spread like the wings of a butterfly. "'A butterfly at Haga in a frosty mist was seen. . . .'"

Tessie March—she is a blur of red and black now, with a gleam of copper at her wrist—walks around the coffee table and out into the middle of the room. "I think I'll get dressed and go out for a while," she says.

There is a long and heavy silence. We look at Alexandra, and she turns her head, first toward Tessie and then toward me. In my drunkenness I could almost say aloud, "Let her go and give me my hour. Her you can have forever. In five months I will be dead and

buried. I will not come again." Alexandra's eyes are fixed so earnestly and so helplessly on my face that for an instant I think I have actually spoken. Then she coughs a little and says, turning toward the window, "Don't think of any such thing, Tessie. Just look at that snow."

The three of us stare through the misted glass at the blurred red and blue of the neon signs. I stoop over and put on my oxfords. I reach for my purse, find my compact, and powder my face.

"I hope *you're* not thinking of going, Miss Littman?" There is honest remorse in that. "We could put you up. It wouldn't be any trouble at all."

"Thanks, I can't. I've reserved a room at a hotel. I've got to be up early. The cloth salesman—he's supposed to telephone me at nine o'clock."

The hazel eyes are lowered in a courteous refusal to witness the flush that has risen with the lie. "We'd like to put you up," she says.

"Do you really have to go, Sophie darling?"

"I really have to go. After all, this is a business trip, you know. Can I pick up a cab on this street?"

"Oh, yes, you can pick up a cab anywhere at all, Sophie. The one good thing about this hateful city is that you can pick up a cab—if you can afford it—on any damned street."

I rise, and Tessie March goes to get my coat and bag, and the two of us are left standing face to face. It is only then that she sees my thickened waistline.

"Oh, Sophie, you're going to have a baby, and I didn't even notice. I——"

"Hardly anybody notices when you're sitting down. I'm only four months gone."

She says nothing. She stares at me and wrings her hands.

"What's the matter, Baby?" She looks small and slight, and, with the help of the cocktails and the dignity of my breeding state, I feel that I am speaking to a child.

"Nothing. Only, are you sure you'll be all right?"

"Of course I'll be all right. Don't I look fine?"

"You certainly do. Fact is, you look very pretty, your skin looks all glowy, like an apricot. What do you want? A boy or a girl?"

A cupboard door creaks closed in the bedroom, and she bends forward and kisses me once, lightly and gently, on the cheek. "Oh, darling, if it's a girl," she says, "call it something good and solid, like 'Sophie.' Don't call it anything fancy and crazy, like 'Alexandra.' And teach it to make chicken and noodles and wash dishes and——" She draws her breath in sharply and has another coughing fit. She is still coughing when Tessie March comes and helps me into my coat and hands me my bag. Our farewells are constrained and brief—neither of us speaks of meeting again.

At the first turn of the stairs I look up and see that she is leaning over the railing. Her pale-brown page-boy hair hangs down on both sides, and I cannot see her face, can see only that she raises her fingertips to her mouth and blows me a kiss. I stop and stare at her long—or is it not really very long, is it only that the minutes are drawn out thin and cold because of the gin?

I know that tomorrow, when I waken in a hotel room and dress to catch the early train, I will have saved only a dim and distorted image of her. The stairs are long and steep, and the nauseating pressure is rising at the base of my throat. I walk through the hallway, open the door, and stand in the whirling snow. I will never see her again, not in this world. And, for the first time in my life, I am sorry that I have not deceived myself into thinking that there will be another world.

Alexandra

PART THREE

T

HE years go by. Life, which abhors a vacuum, does not leave me even a lasting sense of emptiness. My only real regret over her departure is regret at the discovery that I seldom think of her now. I am in my thirties; we are busy, we are weary, we spend our evenings at home with the children. A new kind of existence, in which she has had no part, has crowded out the things that she and I used to do together. Even our old haunts—the Park, the Public Library, the Museum—have passed into the possession of another generation.

She writes to me now and then, and I always answer. I remember particularly the first letter I had from her after she left the WPA. Two producers had been bidding for her at once, and she had signed up with one of them to play—just imagine!—Sonya in Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*. *Uncle Vanya* was opening in Philadelphia and would move to New York, provided, of course, that it moved at all. Still, she had high hopes; the female

lead was a star who had made her mark both on Broadway and in Hollywood, and the producer was canny and lucky, an old hand at the game. But somewhere in the fall of the sentences there was an uneasy overtone; she went to too many pains to justify her break with the WPA. It was true that they were still struggling for recognition; she supposed she had been of some help to them, but then there were probably others who could do as well for them as she could. It was important for her to get a start in the Broadway theater—there was no telling how long the WPA would last. And such a salary—my God, who could refuse a salary like that, after all those years? In spite of the old eager tone of that letter and of all the others that followed it, telling the story of her almost fabulous rise to fame, I felt as detached from the events of her life as though I had never known her; I might just as well have been reading a feature article about some other actress in a magazine. And I could not blame myself too much for that sense of remoteness. After all, *she* had ceased to take any lively interest in *my* world. She always relegated her brief discussion of my affairs to a postscript, which she concluded with a wearisome formula: "My love to Philip, give Susie a kiss for me, and *do* take good care of yourself."

The years which she did not share with me were years of change. There was war in Europe, and I was pregnant again. My personal conviction of imminent death was immersed in the general slaughter—death in Rotterdam, death in Warsaw, death in London, universal death. . . . Then, one December afternoon in the mid-

dle of a Brahms symphony, there was death at Pearl Harbor, too. I paced around the house in the soundless Sunday dusk, so numb that I did not even remember to turn on the lights; and the new being within me lay so sluggish and quiet that I almost convinced myself that it, too, was dead. And yet, for us—and I am still ashamed to admit it—the changes of the war years were changes for the good. My husband no longer worked in the State Liquor Store; he was hired as an assistant professor at the University to teach math to air cadets, and I bore my second child, a son, in so much ease and luxury that I was faintly ashamed of myself.

As for Alexandra—one of her letters openly confessed her shame. She had tried, honest to God, Sophie, she had gone straight to the USO and tried to join one of the units bound for Europe. Scared as she was of air raids—really, even in New York, whenever a siren sounded she was scared out of her wits—she had gone and asked them to send her wherever they chose. She had convinced herself that it was her duty to give up a role in which she had made a major triumph, the gay and brilliant Millament in Congreve's *Way of the World*. And then the recruiting board had refused her because of her bronchitis, and the worst of it was that she had walked out of the place in something close to a state of ecstasy. She would have to admit it—she was glad to keep Millament, glad beyond telling to be out of range of the bombs, glad to keep her own bathtub and her own good bed. She was spending off-hours in the Canteen, of course, but that was nothing. She was

a wretch and a coward, and she was thoroughly ashamed of herself.

It was an honest letter, and called for an honest answer. I wrote her about the advantages of Philip's new job—the short hours, the little group of interesting faculty people whom we were seeing once a week these days. But somehow I never wrote her about Les Talbot. Perhaps that was because I could not bring myself to indicate to her what I had come to know myself: that another being could almost stand in her place. Not that I gave him the sort of ardor that I had given to Alexandra in the past. We grow old; our affections, like the late summer sun, lie with a cooler radiance on what stands in their light. Still, it was Les Talbot that I expected now when the doorbell rang, and it was to him that I talked with the intimacy I had once reserved for her alone.

How, precisely, had I come by Les Talbot? A water color of his—a cold, gray, mournful picture of a solitary young man on a beach—had caught my eye in a WPA exhibit back in the days when we were all poor together. I had gone several times to look at the painting, and I had finally decided that I would take five or ten dollars out of my limited budget to buy it. I wrote the artist at greater length and with more enthusiasm than the occasion called for, and, when weeks passed without a reply, my feelings were hurt. It was two months since I had written and I had almost forgotten the whole matter when he turned up at our front door one evening.

I remember everything about that August evening—even the weather. The day had been hot and oppressive,

but at suppertime the whole city was transformed by a sudden change. Faraway thunder sounded over the outlying hills, but our patch of sky remained radiantly clear; and the stifling heat was picked up and carried off in five minutes by a strong, high current of air that washed our kitchen clean of the smell of fried salami and eggs, and freshened it with the smell of new-cut grass. Out of sheer exhilaration, I dressed Susie in one of her new dresses, a blue one with a wreath of pink roses, and put her in her play-pen close to the open front door. Philip came home in an unusually affable humor, and we sat down to supper in the kitchen. I was pushing a heap of green salad onto his plate when I heard somebody talking to the baby at the front door.

The voice was masculine, resonant, and strangely familiar. I stood with the wooden salad fork in my hand and tried to identify the owner, certain that I had heard that voice many times before. "You're an awfully pretty girl, aren't you, though?" it said. "Yes, you're really something of a beauty, indeed you are, with all those thick black curls. And that's a handsome dress you've got on, very handsome, I'd say. Come on over here, and let's have a look at it. What's on the front of it? Roses?"

"Who *is* that, Philip?" I said.

"Doesn't sound like anybody."

I walked into the living room and saw, beyond the shadow of the screen door, a total stranger, a handsome, shabby stranger in a pair of dungarees and a blue sport shirt. He was dark-haired, pale-eyed, and distressingly thin.

"Good evening," I said.

"Are you Mrs. Sadler?"

"Yes." The sun was on his face, and his eyes were startlingly light against the clear tan of his skin—light-blue eyes, red at the tear ducts. On closer scrutiny, his arresting good looks were slightly marred by an air of seediness.

"Talbot, Leslie Talbot is my name."

"Oh. . . ." My weeks of resentment moved in between us.

"I meant to come earlier. I really did, believe it or not."

The wind streamed down through the trees, flapped his collar, moved the thick black locks that hung over his forehead. "That's all right," I told him, suppressing an impulse to say that I had forgotten the whole business weeks ago.

"But I *did* mean to come sooner, I've had it on my mind for some time now, it's only that I've run into some trouble lately, otherwise I'd have been here before."

I kept silent, knowing suddenly what echoes his speech had called up in my remembrance. It was not the voice itself that I had heard repeatedly in the past—it was his way of running on, his breathless, hastening way of pushing several sentences into a single line. Alexandra did that. Even in her letters, she. . . . I bent down and picked up Susie. I pushed the play-pen to one side with my leg, and unlatched the screen door.

"Don't you want your picture, Mrs. Sadler?" He held up a flat package, wrapped in brown paper.

"Maybe you don't want to sell it to me," I said. "After all, I didn't offer you much of a price."

"I didn't want to sell it at all. I mean, I didn't want to sell it to you. No, damn it, that's not right, either. What I'm doing my best to say is: you're welcome to it, take it, it's a gift, it's coming to you after that letter—nobody ever said such things about a painting of mine before." He stood on the doorsill, neither in nor out, with the screen door open behind him. A tremendous bluebottle buzzed past him into the parlor. "May I step in for a second?" he asked. "It seems I'm bringing on a plague of horseflies."

"Of course. We're just having supper."

He blushed. "It wasn't very bright of me to barge in like this, was it? But I brought this thing in to work with me this morning, and I thought I'd drop it off on the way home."

"Why don't you have supper with us? We're not having anything fancy—but if you don't mind. . . ."

"No, honestly, I couldn't do any such thing. I——"

"I can't take your picture for nothing, either—not unless you come in and have a bite. There's nobody waiting for you at home, is there?"

That perfectly normal question had a disturbing effect upon him. He closed his eyes and swallowed; his lower jaw trembled when he tried to speak; and he put up his dark, lean hand to hold it still. It must have been a black and heavy trouble, I thought, that had come to roost at his place.

"No, not a soul," he said. "Nobody at all."

I almost said—and later had reason to thank God that

I hadn't— Do you live by yourself? It was Susie who kept me from asking that annihilating question. She leaned forward and touched the end of his nose. It was a sharp nose, a little too long, but narrow enough to be aristocratic. "If you want it, you can have it, Sis," he said. "It's been the one consuming sorrow of my life."

"You'll stay, won't you?"

"If it wouldn't be any trouble. . . ."

"It won't be any trouble. It'll be a pleasure. We don't get out much, not with the baby. We spend most of our evenings alone."

I set Susie down in the play-pen and started for the kitchen. On the way through the dining room, he came up behind me and startled me a little by touching my hand. "Wait a minute, there's something I omitted to tell you," he said, giving me a bright blue look and a lively smile. "You're kind, you know, you're really extraordinarily kind."

It was a long time—it was literally years—before I learned the nature of Les Talbot's trouble. There were a good many occasions when I might have asked him about it, occasions when he seemed to go so far as to invite my curiosity. There was, for instance, the afternoon when he stopped in to tell us he had been given his first commission to paint a portrait—one hundred dollars, mind you, all that money for getting a likeness of a debutante's face. But hell, he said, there was only one thing wrong with money: you couldn't carry it back into the past, you couldn't take it back in time and spend it there to undo a mistake or erase a year of wretched-

ness. And, even when he was more successful than he'd ever dreamed he'd be—even when his least prized and most facile talent, his ability to catch a likeness, was paying for good meals and decent clothes and a top-floor studio apartment with a north light—even then his new handsomeness would sometimes be lessened by a return of the hangdog air, the quivering jaw, the bloodshot eyes, the seediness. He would go off to the country for several days and return with a stark, compelling canvas—an old man poking into a garbage can or a pale girl dragging a comb through her hair with tragic listlessness. "Too bad I'm so dreary, isn't it?" he would say. "You see how it is, I'm always at my best when I announce most loudly that this is an intolerable world."

Maybe he was right—the world had certainly not been too good to him. During those years I learned in scraps and patches what sort of life he had led. The lot of the Talbots had always been dirt-poor. The father, an alcoholic, had run back to Ireland twenty years ago and had not been heard from since. The mother had worked herself to the bone in a laundry and had died when he, her eldest, was eighteen. The sister—she had never been healthy—she, too, was dead. He had been offered a scholarship at the College of Fine Arts, but any thought of further schooling was impossible, of course, in his case. He had worked for a while in a mill, and afterward in the warehouse of a department store, painting when he could, on Sundays and in the evenings, and getting instruction once a week at the Settlement House. Nobody had given much thought

to his painting, though; and he had almost dropped over with shock when the WPA had assigned him to the "easel project" and allowed him to work at home.

His history should have been enough to account for the bloodshot eyes and the shaking mouth, but I was not entirely satisfied. There was something else, something violent and black. Poverty alone, especially poverty that is over and done with, does not make a man tremble from head to foot when he has dropped a live ash on the carpet.

The war did not break up our intimacy with him. He was rejected by the draft board because, as he put it to anybody who happened to be around, he had "not found favor in the eyes of the psychiatrist." I took some pride in the fact that he never missed a Sunday at our house. He had plenty of other invitations. The elegant old ladies and debutantes of whom he made charming charcoal sketches at eighty dollars apiece, the distinguished intellectuals and the exciting young bohemians around town were always asking him to something or other—a dinner party, a week end in the country, cocktails at five, after-theater supper at twelve. Success had given him an easy grace which would have been an acquisition in anybody's living room. When my husband was having a faculty party, it was Les who turned a stiff occasion into a lively one, getting around to every guest in the place, telling off-color stories that we would never have dared to tell, appeasing a cranky old wife with pertinent questions about her children, and putting a shy new one at ease by complimenting her hair-do or her lace handkerchief. It was he who knew how to mix

martinis. It was he who thought the iced tea would be better in the punch bowl, with mint and lemon slices floating on top. Nobody would have believed that the seedy-looking, jittery fellow who had stood on the other side of the screen door could have been transformed into this self-assured young man, who turned up every Sunday to eat my hot cakes and never failed to say that he'd rather be here than anywhere, that it was more comfortable, safer, warmer here than in any other house in the world.

That Sunday in February when I blundered upon Les Talbot's almost-forgotten trouble was only slightly different from the rest. He had been getting his water colors ready to send up to New York for his second one-man show; and he dragged the whole batch of them out to the house that Sunday in a big gray folder, because he wanted me to choose a couple of them for myself. He came at eleven, as usual, left the folder in the parlor, and sat down at the breakfast table beside Susie, who plied him with questions about certain fossilized dinosaurs that she had seen at the Museum. Philip took no part in the conversation. He had brought the theater and music section of the *Times* to the table and was gloomily contemplating the programs he would miss because we did not live in New York.

It was a perfect Sunday morning. The sun was bright on the snowy window sill. Susie's cardinal came to the window to pick up the sunflower seeds she had put out for him; the sausages were real pre-war sausages, without a trace of cereal stuffing under their brown skins; and the crystalline air had restored to my senses a

child's capacity for enjoying every sight and sound and smell. We were well into the second round of hot cakes when Philip took the outside sheet off the theater and music section, folded it into a square, and handed it to me. "This'll interest you," he said. It was a full-length picture of Alexandra dressed in armor. The caption was simple and specific: ALEXANDRA HILL IN THE TITLE ROLE OF BERNARD SHAW'S SAINT JOAN.

I had seen other pictures of her in the *Times*. I had seen her as Sonya, listening to the music of a guitar. I had seen her standing against a stark pillar, in the mourning robes of Antigone. Every now and then her friend, the gangling director, had sent news items to the local sheets, pointing out that a daughter of the city and a graduate of the College of Fine Arts had risen to the first rank in her profession. There had even been an article about her in *Time*, containing pictures, a glib little history of her life, and quotations from the critics: SHE HAS REVIVED FOR US THE TRADITION OF SUPERB AND EXQUISITE CRAFTSMANSHIP WHICH WE HAD LONG BELIEVED DEAD. . . . IT REMAINS AMAZING THAT SO YOUNG A WOMAN AS MISS HILL SHOULD BE ABLE TO CONTROL SUCH A WEALTH OF INTUITION WITH SO MUCH SHEER INTELLIGENCE. . . . HER RANGE IS THE RANGE OF THE GREAT CLASSIC ARTISTS, EMBRACING PATHOS, COMEDY, STARK TRAGEDY. . . . And, as the voice of critical opinion had grown more ecstatic, her letters to me had grown more and more humble. "I worry about Portia. Maybe I shouldn't have changed directors. . . ." "Last night at the opening of *Candida* I was more frightened than I was that first time I walked on-

stage in the high school auditorium. . . ." "Please, Sophie, come up if you can to see my Antigone. I've worked myself to a shadow trying to make it right."

But this particular picture was more moving to me than any of the other tides of her glory that had happened to wash against our distant place. I stared at it through a blur of tears, stared at her shining, parted hair and at her small, frail face rising out of the collar-piece of the metal cuirass; and I thought how changed she was, how little remained of the dear presence that had sat at our table on lost Friday nights.

"Look, Ma," said Susie, "the cardinal's back again."

"Let your Ma alone," said Philip, "she's busy looking at something else."

She was changed, and my own life—my children, my husband, my house—had kept me from her these many years. Tessie March, not I, had witnessed the stages of her transformation. Tessie March had seen the first exquisite lines of age drawn into her face. I had not gone even as far as Cleveland to watch her come on as Millament. Jonathan had whooping cough when she was Portia. Susie had scarlet fever when she was Antigone. And, with the keen perception which had been given to me by the wintry, crystal air, I saw the years rush like bright water through my hands.

"What's the matter with Mommie?" Jonathan said.

"Nothing, fellow." It was Les's voice. "She's just happy to see an old friend again." He bent across the table and held out his hand. "That's your Alexandra, isn't it, Sophie? May I see, too?"

I handed him the paper.

"My God, Sophie, she's really beautiful," he said.

Beautiful? I got up and leaned over his shoulder to look at the photograph. That was it—she had made herself beautiful—and that, rather than the inroads of the years, had wrought the change. Some will within her had worked all these years to create a sure illusion of loveliness out of the plain substance of which she was made. The serenity of her countenance, the quiet line of her mouth, the proud lift of her shoulders—all of them announced with dignity, I am past insults now. I have re-created myself. Nobody can call me an ugly little *shicksa* with no shape and little eyes—nobody can say such things about me any more.

"Yes," said Philip, "I guess you could call her beautiful, at that."

"Really, I mean it, I think she's the loveliest woman I ever saw. I'd like to do her portrait, I'd like to——"

I smiled. "Really," I told them both, "she's not as beautiful as all that. It's simply that she's done the best she could for herself."

Afterward, when they had left me alone with the dishes in the kitchen, I wondered whether there had been a tinge of disloyalty in my last remark, whether I had been prompted by jealousy to disparage her ever so slightly in the presence of Philip and Les. It was well past two when I finished cleaning up the kitchen. I had kept the folded paper lying on the table, had looked at it, cried over it a little, read bits of the accompanying article, and made myself more at home with the changed face by the time the last pan was in the cupboard and I had closed the door. I noticed as I

came through the hall that the house was unusually quiet; and when I walked into the parlor, drying my hands on my apron, I found Les alone on the sofa with the big gray folder on his lap.

"Where are the rest of them?" I said.

"That irrepressible daughter of yours blackmailed your husband into taking them for a walk. You know, I believe your friend Alexandra has driven these pictures of mine quite out of your head. However, with my customary insensitivity, I shall insist on your looking at them." He patted the sofa cushion beside him, and I sat down. He untied the strings of the folder and opened it so that one half of it was spread across my knees.

I took an easy, unashamed pleasure in sitting close to him, our shoulders touching, our cheeks almost meeting as we bent our heads to examine a detail—a pot of geranium, a pair of worn slippers, a sleeping cat, a fence. "I'll have the devil of a time making up my mind which ones to choose," I said. "Fact is, I want them all."

"Well, keep turning them over."

I turned them a little more quickly, past a deserted houseboat on a sluggish river, past a blind man led by a dog, to a reddish, purplish, blackish thing—and there I stopped. His arm had stiffened against mine. I turned and looked at him and saw that his mouth had fallen open.

"Is that there?" he said in a strange voice. "My God, is that still there? I thought I'd pulled it out. I thought I destroyed it long ago."

I knew I should not look, and looked, and saw a

woman's pale, naked feet, a woman's skirt, a woman's waist. And at the waist, one became two—two girls growing, as it were, on the same stem, one of them chewing mournfully on a length of lank black hair, the other one laughing and filling the air around her with the scarlet petals of a torn rose. The title was scrawled in pencil across the right-hand corner: "Frances, manic and depressed."

He hunched down like a man with a cramp. He covered the picture with his forearms, and remained bent over it for the space of several heartbeats. Then he straightened. "That's a silly thing to do, isn't it?" he said. "You saw it, didn't you? Why should I cover it up? Go ahead and look if you want. I don't mind, I——"

"I certainly don't want to look at it if you don't want me to."

"Go ahead. Really, it's all right with me. It's a picture of my sister Frances. She was insane. I painted that thing just a couple of months before she died."

"I'm terribly sorry, Les. Let's look at the others later. Suppose I get you a drink."

"Listen, Sophie, I'd rather talk about it—that is, to you. Until the others come back, not after they're here. No, stay here, don't get me any liquor. Liquor doesn't help. A man could go off his beam himself, you know, trying to drink his way out of it. Let me tell you about it once—just once, and then we'll never mention it again, so help me God. That week—that same week you sent me the letter—that was the week she died. That's why I couldn't come right away with the picture.

I couldn't. I—I was in the hospital for a while myself."

I remembered the shaking mouth and the bloodshot eyes. "Good God, Les," I said in a fit of remorse, "why didn't you tell me? I know what it is to raise a little sister. And with somebody helpless like that, you'd love her more——"

"I thought I loved her. God knows, I really thought I loved her. I always thought I did, but I don't know, I don't know. She was a sweet thing, Sophie. Honest she was, even at her craziest, she was a sweet thing—a kid, a poor, crazy kid. On her bad days, she'd chew her hair and whimper. Then she'd go to the other extreme, she'd skip like a five-year-old and cut up the curtains and the sheets and throw the pieces all over the place, and it was pretty, it was actually pretty, it was exactly as if she were scattering flowers. I never thought of her as a burden. I can't remember a single time when I—— Still, there are dark corners in people's minds. Everybody knows there are dark corners, and what goes on in them we never really know. Yet I can look you in the face and swear I loved her."

His pale eyes blazed for a second into mine. "I'm sure you did. For God's sake, don't torment yourself," I said.

"Oh, but wait, Sophie. I haven't told you everything yet. They won't be coming back right away, will they? I wish——"

"I don't imagine they will. If they've stayed this long, they probably stopped in to see Philip's mother, and she'll keep them for a while."

"Three times they took her away to the State Hos-

pital. It was awful for her there, and I kept saying I could take care of her, I kept wanting to get her back home. And after I got the WPA job, they said she was well enough for me to take her, since I had that kind of job and could stay around and look after her while I was painting. And I really liked to have her there while I was painting. If she chattered and danced around behind me, I was used to it, and I never thought how it would be if she——”

“You wouldn’t, of course,” I said.

“We were doing fine. I had the job and she had a whole string of good weeks, one right after the other. And then one afternoon I went down to the project to leave a batch of paintings, and I ran into a couple of girls who worked with me down there, and they were going back my way, so we stopped into the delicatessen on the corner to have a glass of beer. I only meant to stay for a couple of minutes, and the delicatessen was just half a block away from my place, just at the end of the street. But we got to talking about things at the project—oh, God, I don’t remember, I can’t figure out how long we sat there, laughing and talking and drinking beer. Then all of a sudden we heard the fire engines, and people were running up the street. And somebody stuck his head in the door of the delicatessen and said, ‘Hey, Talbot, that’s your place. Your place is on fire.’ And it was—when I got there the smoke was pouring out of the window of our room. And she was up there, she was up there alone. She’d found a box of matches and set fire to the bedding, and before they could get to her she burned to death.”

"Oh, Les! Oh, my God!"

He pushed the folder onto the floor and laid his head in my lap. Loud, dry, sobs were torn up by the roots out of his body. He sobbed like that for a long time. Finally he lifted his head and said, "They should be back by now, shouldn't they?"

"I suppose so, but it doesn't matter. I've been bawling my eyes out half the day myself."

"I wouldn't want them to see me in a state like this. I'll go and wash my face."

"I wouldn't bother."

He started for the bathroom, stopped, and came back to stroke my cheek. "Poor Sophie, I shouldn't have told you," he said.

"Look, dear, I'm glad you did. You should have told me long ago. I always think——" I stopped because I could hear Susie pounding up the porch stairs. He went into the bathroom, and I gathered the pictures and put them back into the folder without permitting myself to look again at the black and scarlet and purple one. By the time they had come into the parlor, all traces of the violent event were gone. And Les, issuing out of the bathroom with a wet washrag in his hand, explained that he had had something in his eye—it was out now, but it had hurt like hell, had actually made him cry.

The atmosphere of tears hung tremulous over us for the rest of the afternoon. When Susie brought the conversation back to Alexandra by asking why the pretty lady on the kitchen table was dressed like a man, I fell into a brooding state and let her father explain.

I thought of the things I had meant to do and had never done: the Chopin Prelude I had always wanted to learn, the begonia cutting that had died before I could get around to planting it in a bigger pot, the dress that Susie had outgrown before I had sewed on the necessary hooks and eyes. "You know," I said, "I think I'll go up to New York in a week or so to see Alexandra do *Saint Joan*. I'll get my sister to come down and look after the kids for a couple of days."

"You won't have to," Philip said.

"What do you mean, I won't have to?"

"Don't you ever pay any attention to what you read? The play's coming here. It says so in the article. It's closing in New York in April and going on the road. It should be here some time in May."

Late in April I received a printed announcement from the Local Congress of Women's Clubs requesting my "presence at a luncheon to be given at 12:30 on Monday, May 6, in honor of Miss Alexandra Hill, in the Wedgewood Room of the Ramsay Hotel." I was annoyed by the cool impersonality of the formal card until I realized that she could not have sent out the invitations—she had no doubt merely been asked to add such names as she might choose to the prepared list of guests. I imagined her writing those names at an elegant modern desk in her New York apartment, chewing her pencil and calling up the past. And I amused myself in the interim by trying to guess what other remembered ones would be summoned in. The gangling director? The local newspaper critic who had promised great

things for her back in the days when a promise was a risk? The retired, purple-cheeked, wheezing Miss Dunovan?

I had never attended a formal luncheon before, and by the morning of May 6 I had begun to wish I had not been invited to this one. I was self-conscious about a cluster of rosebuds on my hat; I was not sure that a black-and-pink print would be correct in such brilliant weather; and my feelings were hurt that she had not telephoned—surely she had come into the city last night, surely I must be of very little consequence to her if she could be content to see me in a crowd of silly women after all these years. It was eleven o'clock when the telephone rang. "Hello," I said sourly, not wishing to make a damned fool of myself. But the answer came in her breathy, tender, unmistakable voice: "Oh, Sophie, it's so good to hear you, I just this minute got in."

She had to talk fast, she'd simply have to have a bath before the luncheon, and there were two reporters waiting in the lobby. But after the luncheon, because of skillful maneuvering on her part, the afternoon was free until six, when she'd have to do a broadcast over WCDA. Could I possibly—oh, Sophie, please, please—stay with her in her hotel room during that little breathing space? Oh, I was good to do it, she knew how hard it was for me to get away, with the children and the house. She'd be seeing me soon, soon. . . .

Her vibrant voice and her eagerness to spend her brief period of rest in my company convinced me that my brooding on the rushing years had been nothing

but morbidity. She has not changed, I thought in the taxi on the way to the Ramsay; really, she is exactly the same. When she comes in, I told myself among the plump ladies and the table bouquets in the Wedgewood Room, when she comes in, she will look first for me, and find me with her eyes, and smile. . . . I could have gone up to Miss Dunovan and re-introduced myself; she was sitting in desultory conversation with a wizened colleague on a white leather bench against an olive-green wall. I could even have shared several minutes of chatter with the gangling director, who hailed me like an old friend and asked me the lead question: "And what have *you* been doing all these years?" But it was more pleasant to stay apart and savor the anticipation, to enjoy the sunlight slanting through the white Venetian blinds, to wonder what we were going to eat at that festive T-shaped table, to wait for her to come in. . . .

Yet I missed the moment of her coming. Not because of any outward distraction. Only because I had been looking around for the newspaper critic who had spoken kindly of her in her early days—and had suddenly remembered, with a contraction of the heart, that he couldn't be here, was dead, had died a couple of years ago. When the general stir aroused me, she was already seated at the head of the table, hidden by the crowd. It was only when everybody had found his place card and subsided into his chair, and the impatient waiters had begun to serve the jellied consomme, that I saw her, obliquely and halfway down the length of the

table. Then I could no longer deceive myself. She was not the same.

She was wearing a pale-blue cloche and a dress of the same color, severely simple except for the big collar, which lay back over her shoulders like a shawl. She sat behind a table bouquet of blue larkspur and white roses, and she looked—how shall I say it?—she looked less like herself than like an exquisite, flattering portrait of herself. Her face was as flawless and serene as the face of a statue. She turned first left, then right to address measured pleasantries to her table mates; and those motions were no more her motions than the face was her face. Yet only a malicious fool could have accused her of affectation. She was modeling herself after no one, real or imagined; it was only that she was releasing, in every facial expression, every gesture, nothing but the refined and finished essence of herself. I remembered the poor devil who had stood behind Mrs. Saltzman's kitchen table; I remembered the distracted creature counting her money under the buckeye tree in the back yard; I remembered the exhausted wretch who had comforted herself with Tessie March's cocktails—and my admiration surged up and almost washed away my love.

I saw then that she was looking at me. With the completely inoffensive air of one whose position has given her certain never-to-be-questioned liberties, she raised her hand to indicate to the gentleman at her right that he should be quiet, just for a moment, please. Turning in my direction, she gave me a long, grave smile. "That is my dear friend, Sophie Sadler," she

said—I could see what she said by the precise movements of her lips. Then she raised her eyebrows, perhaps in mock amazement at the gaiety of my hat, and blew me a kiss.

We proceeded from the jellied consomme to the creamed chicken in patty shells. The small, sleek spaniel of a woman on my right, who had obviously wondered at the start what *I* could be doing there, grew very conversational after the mark of distinction Alexandra had conferred upon me. We were seldom interrupted by the ancient man-about-town on my left, who was almost completely taken up with the bosom of a young woman on the other side of the table. I felt a bit put-out that all of us were plainly less interested in the guest of honor than in our own tawdry affairs. Still, I thought, turning from the last crisp flake of the patty shell to the lettuce and blue cheese salad, she would scarcely want us to sit and gape at her for a couple of hours.

A couple of hours turned out to be the estimate of an optimist. There was a pale-green parfait, there was coffee, there were mints and nuts, there was a setting back of chairs, a crossing of legs, a lighting of cigarettes which could mean only that the assembly was preparing to put up with two or three speeches at least. I hoped that she would be called upon to speak—not that I thought she could say anything significant on such an occasion, only because I wanted to see her standing up, wanted particularly to see her hands, which had been hidden most of the time behind the flowers. A solemn, flat woman with a determined manner rose and announced defiantly—as if she expected somebody to gain-

say her—that the city, the women of the city, and womankind in general might take pride in the fact that Alexandra Hill, a woman and a fellow-townsmen, etc., etc., etc. . . . The head of the Board of Education made as much as possible out of the fact that this fair flower—he actually said “fair flower”—had grown and flourished in our public schools. . . . The gangling director took up from there, and, in a genuine transport, forgot—God bless him!—to give his institution the proper credit line. When he had finished and was passing behind her on the way back to his chair, she turned around. Her eyes were wet and bright. With an impassioned swiftness that almost shattered her statuesque serenity, she seized and kissed his big, loose hand.

They liked that, and applauded it, and called, with such soft insistence as would not upset so delicate a being, for a speech; and after a minute of graceful demurring, she was on her feet. Her hands—she raised them to push back her hair—were visible now. They were white, and the fingernails were painted a faint rose; but at the knuckles there was still a trace of the old raw dryness, and the wrists were still as pathetically narrow as the wrists of a child.

What she said was brief and earnest: She was happy to be with them again. There was more significance than one might think in a word like “fellow-townsmen.” All the great actors’ troupes in the past—the Greek players and the Globe players and Goldoni’s—they had all been quite content to live out their lives and work out their talents in a single town. She envied them; they had been very fortunate. They had lived close to their roots

and among their kinsmen, had seen their mothers and their grandfathers and their uncles in their audiences, had married their fellow-townsfolk and walked with their children in gardens of their own. Today it was different. If the same sustaining face appeared twice in the remote reaches of an unfamiliar auditorium, the actor would not know and could not profit by the constancy of that devotion. Today the actor had an apartment, not a house with a garden. Rootless and solitary, he made new friends with other actors at every first rehearsal, and, on every closing night, saw those friends depart. It was a shifting, lonely life, distracting, upsetting, without the security and serenity which are almost essential to the growth of true greatness. One never did one's best—one did as well as one could. If *we* had had a town theater—a real, rooted repertory theater—she would have been more than happy to have stayed with us until the day she died. She had hoped once that such theaters would be established in her day. She did not think so now—things went otherwise in this confused world. Nevertheless, there were always children, and where there were children there were new beginnings, new ways of getting around the old impossible barriers, new means of setting the old ridiculous jumble right. And now, in closing, let her say again that she was happy to be here, very happy. We were her people. She loved the city and thought of it often. She even loved the smell of the coal dust and the smog. This was her home.

The applause was prolonged, but hushed. I noticed that everyone around me had a furtive air, as if each

felt personally responsible for the fact that there was no repertory theater in our town. The embarrassment ebbed with the clapping. They left their seats and crowded around her, asking foolish questions and shaking hands. I went to the doorway and waited. I waited a long time—there were so many of them, and everybody had to get his ten cents' worth in. It was half-past three by the time she had kissed Miss Dunovan and the director, whom she had saved until last. "Well, Sophie. . . ." she said in a tired voice, taking my hand but not looking into my face. An elevator was standing open in the hall, and we ran for it. She stood close to me in the press, sustaining the stares of the other passengers with dignity, her chin lifted slightly, her eyelids down.

Our real reunion had not yet taken place, nor was it effected at once when we stepped into her suite of rooms—sunny, spacious, and fragrant with long-stemmed roses. There was another presence to be reckoned with. Not Tessie March, although I had a wild notion that it was she who sat on the sofa with her feet curled under her and a book on her knees. A thin mulatto girl, wearing a lacy maid's apron over a beautifully tailored dress of black bengaline, closed her book, set her slender feet on the floor, stood up, and plucked the blue cloche straight off Alexandra's head.

"You gonna put on your housecoat, Miss Alexandra?" she said.

"Yes, I guess I will. This is my good friend, Mrs. Sadler. Sophie, this is Isabelle. Isabelle's been with me for the last three years."

Isabelle gave me a thoroughly unself-conscious nod and tossed the blue cloche onto a chair.

"I don't suppose I'll need you again until half-past five, Isabelle. I can get into my housecoat myself."

"Yes, but you can't do your hair yourself, Miss Alexandra. Lemme stay and do your hair, so you won't look like a mess in front of Mrs. Sadler."

"Don't be silly. I've looked like a mess in front of Mrs. Sadler before."

"Has she though, Mrs. Sadler?" Isabelle said. "Well, if she has, I guess it's all right." She tucked her book under one elbow, and, pulling Alexandra toward her, unfastened two zippers, one up the back and one down the side. Then she ran her finger in disapproval around the lower edge of Alexandra's hair and walked out of the room, jiggling at the hips and humming to herself.

The door swung shut behind her. I was glad that she had been there—she had left us something to talk about. The sense of sustained closeness that had been between us among strangers at the table—where was it, now that the two of us were alone? Too much had happened, to her and to me. What should I ask her? Where should I begin? I do not know how long I would have remained wordless, forcing my eyes to focus on her changed face, if it had not been possible for me to say, "That's a very attractive girl you've got. How did you find her? Through an agency?"

"Isabelle? I got her in jail." She walked past me into the bedroom, and her voice came muffled through the clothes she was pulling over her head. In the old

days, I would have gone in to help her. Now I stood still, annoyed at her flippancy. "I'll tell you how it happened. She worked for an acquaintance of mine, a bitch who is an ingenue on the side. Really, Sophie, I mean it, she's an out-and-out bitch, and hard to get along with, too. She pushed Isabelle just one step too far, and Isabelle threw a scissors at her head, and cut her, too, right over the eye—three stitches. So she put Isabelle in jail, and I went and bailed her out and had the charge dismissed, and she's been with me ever since." I had to keep telling myself, Now don't be provincial, don't be hopelessly middle class. There's nothing the matter with what she did; fact is, it was a very decent thing for her to do; otherwise, with such a reputation, nobody would ever have hired the poor girl. . . . "I've never been sorry. She's been awfully good to me. She's sort of fresh, Isabelle is, but I like her and she likes me, and I——" She walked out of the bedroom, dressed in a gray taffeta housecoat and holding a hair-brush. Halfway across the room, she stopped. The brush slipped from her hand, her mouth trembled, and she began to weep. "Oh, Sophie darling, how wonderful you look!" She came and held me with cold arms and laid a wet, cold cheek against my cheek. "Oh, I'm so glad to see you, and you look so wonderful, and I'm so ungodly tired!"

I kissed her and felt there was something wanting in my kiss. I kissed her again—two such kisses were scarcely better than one—and pushed her gently in the direction of the sofa. She had remained unchanged in one respect at least: she could not wait, her heart still

raced ahead of the event. . . . "Why don't you make yourself comfortable," I said. "Go ahead, lie down and rest."

She did lie down. I was glad to hear her ask in the old casual way for small favors: Would I hand her that sofa pillow? Would I bring her the afghan—it was probably in the bedroom on the bottom of the bed. Once she was settled, she lay completely still, with her head sunken far into the tapestry cushion. I found her stillness as disquieting as her eagerness, since I could not make up my mind whether it was part of her new aspect or a sign of sickness or exhaustion. Her hands were crossed in an unusual way over the lacy whiteness of the afghan, and I was suddenly aware that she was taking her pulse.

"You look fine," I said.

"Do you really and truly think so, Sophie? I am fine, I guess. Every time I go to the doctor, he says there's nothing the matter, I'm just tired. Only I always think there is, I always think I've got one disease or another."

"But isn't that sort of silly, darling?"

"I guess it is. I have a friend who's a psychiatrist, and he keeps teasing me about it. He says I'm punishing myself because I've got a bad conscience. He thinks I ought to be analyzed. But I don't want to. Everybody's being analyzed, and if a bad conscience is all I've got, I can take care of it myself."

But I knew by the restless glance she turned upon me how little she wanted to take care of it herself. She meant to involve me, and I could not escape without deepening the sense of estrangement between us.

"What's there for you to have a bad conscience about?"

I said.

"A great many things. I'm really a bad sort."

I laughed.

"No, don't laugh, I mean it." She raised herself on her elbow and looked long and intently into my eyes. "I am a bad sort, really. I've sinned all over the place, and especially against the Holy Ghost."

"Philip would say you're suffering from a leave-over of Victorianism. That's what's the matter with half the population."

She shook her head and lay back against the cushion. "You're thinking of men, Sophie, but that isn't what I mean. I've had a fair number of men in my day, but I've never considered it a sin against the Holy Ghost. Not for me, anyway. You sin against the Holy Ghost when you turn against the best and most valuable part of your spirit. With men, my spirit isn't involved—at least not any more."

"Alexandra—in all these years—haven't you ever fallen in love?"

"In love? Just once—just once I almost fell in love." She sighed and flung out her hand in my direction. There was too much space between us, and I drew my armchair closer to the sofa so that I could reach her. But now that I had changed my place to take her outstretched fingers, I could not see beyond the pillow to her face.

"Didn't it last?"

"No, it couldn't have lasted. It was over before it

began. It was Emmanuel—I tried to go back with Emmanuel.”

She held fast to my hand and told me how, in the autumn of the second year of her triumph, she had walked out of the dressing room one night, and had found him waiting at the door, round and rosy and embarrassed, with a bunch of yellow chrysanthemums. To show him how welcome he was, she had embraced him. The Indian-summer warmth of him, the fresh smell of his shirt, the pressure of his cheek—while she had stood there with her arms around his neck, she had felt exactly as if she were eighteen years old. The two of them had gone, very merry and very hungry, to the Russian Tea Room, where he had presented her proudly to the concertmaster and to some of his other friends from the orchestra. They had gone twice a week to the Russian Tea Room after that, and later to her apartment, where they sat alone on the sofa, talking or listening to phonograph records until the sky turned gray with the first light. It had been a blessed time: there was a kindness and a warmth about it; it was almost like being married and living in a house of your own. There was nobody there to disturb them—oh, no, Tessie wasn’t with her any more, she and Tessie saw each other all the time, of course, but Tessie had her own man and her own apartment now. Anyway, she and Emmanuel had thought they were in love, had tried to be in love, had stayed with each other for almost a year. It was strange, it was sad, both of them had kept on trying because they were so fond of each other; but

something infinitely sad had crept into their love-making. It was no use trying to get back to the old days—to the Park and the grass and the foolish blue dress. No matter how you tried, you never could. Afterward, you moved onto your own pillow and congratulated yourself if you hadn't broken his sleep with your unexplainable tears. He hadn't been happy, either; the old lady was sick, and he had had a bad conscience about leaving her alone in their apartment so many nights. No, it was useless, it was over, it had been over before it began. There had been others before him and others after, and she supposed she was bound to take up with somebody else one of these days. But she wasn't involved, not in the spirit. The year she had spent with Emmanuel—that was the closest she had come to falling in love.

I had been watching the May sun fade on the Venetian blinds. The afternoon had begun to wane, and the paling shafts could have been mistaken now for beams of wan, autumnal light. One ghost has arisen of his own accord, I thought. Perhaps it would be well to call up the other. . . . I stroked her fingers. "And what about Mr. Ellery? Have you ever run into him?" I said.

She withdrew her hand and covered it with the border of the afghan. "No," she said in a flat voice, "I haven't seen him at all. I know where he is, though. He's in Hollywood, mostly. He comes to New York every so often, but I never see him. I guess it's much better that way. I guess we were bad for each other. It's funny, the way you still call him 'Mr. Ellery.' You

always called him that. Why couldn't you make yourself call him by his first name?"

"I suppose I never could quite forgive him."

"For hurting me? Don't be foolish, Sophie. Nobody hurt me. I hurt myself."

"Maybe you blame yourself too much."

"That's what my friend the psychiatrist says. Which brings us back to my sins again. Here's our afternoon half spent, and I've only gotten around to the venial ones."

I did not want to hear about her sins any more than, long ago, on the bench in front of the Library, I had wanted to hear about her connection with Emmanuel. I was glad that she had relinquished my hand; she would have felt rejection in my touch. "Why do you want to confess to me?" I said.

"I have my reasons." Her voice was flippant, and I imagined that, behind the turned-up corner of the pillow, she had sensed my withdrawal and was arraigning me with scornful eyes. "For instance, once you know what sort of person I am, you can make up your mind whether you want to speak to me and have me in your house among your innocent children."

"Honest to God, Alexandra, you're just as crazy as you used to be."

"Very probably I am, Sophie. Nevertheless. . . . Give me a minute or so, won't you? I'll make it brief. I'll be like the White Rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland*. I'll begin at the beginning, go through to the end, and then stop. To start with, *mea culpa*, I left the WPA, the poor, decent little WPA."

If this was the sort of sin that lay heavy on her conscience, I had been foolish to recoil. "You'd have had to leave it eventually, darling," I said.

"Yes, but I left it too soon. And the very kind and well-meaning producer who gave me the part in *Uncle Vanya*—I left him, too, walked out on him flat for a better part. And when they said I had bronchitis and couldn't go to Europe, I was so glad I almost jumped out of my shoes. I was so filthy glad I went to a restaurant and stuffed myself to the eyes with lobster and ate two orders of asparagus hollandaise."

"I know, Alexandra. When Philip didn't have to go, we were glad, too. Maybe it's better in the long run to eat the lobster and be happy than to pretend you're noble and sorry. At least you didn't lie."

"Oh, I lied plenty about other matters. Whenever it was necessary to lie, I lied. I did every necessary thing. I deliberately spoiled the performance of a nice young girl—"

I started out of my complacency. "I can't believe you'd do a thing like that," I said.

"I certainly did. She was a threat to me, and I got her out of the way as fast as I could. It happens all the time, but that's no excuse. What was worse, I elbowed an aging woman out of a part she needed, simply because I wanted it for myself. No, listen, don't interrupt me, I'm telling the truth. I walked out on decent people and played up to people who made me sick at the stomach and changed immortal lines to satisfy the whim of a goddamned fool. Men? Men aren't any-

thing. These other sins, they're the real ones—the sins against the Holy Ghost.”

She sat up, pushed the sofa pillow to the floor, and looked straight into my amazed and troubled eyes.

“You despise me, don’t you, Sophie?”

“No, darling, no, I don’t, I don’t at all. There must have been very good reasons, otherwise . . .”

She put her elbow on the arm of the sofa, rested her chin in her hand, and gave me one of her new, remote smiles. “It’s good of you to say that,” she said. “I did have a reason. I thought it was a very good one—at least, I thought so for a while.”

“I can imagine how a person who had genius could be driven to anything, almost anything, so that he could fulfill himself.”

She bent forward and laid her hand briefly and lightly on my knee. “No, it wasn’t that, Sophie. But you’re kind to think so. You’re very kind.”

“What was it, then?”

“Not fame, certainly. Fame is what you saw at the luncheon table—the applause of strangers. And who, for the applause of strangers, would sin against the Holy Ghost? Not money either, darling. I have a great deal of money, you know. We used to think Ken Ellery was rich—do you remember? I’m rich now—do you know what?—I make around fifty thousand dollars a year. But that’s a worrisome business, too. You don’t know what to give away and what to keep. I don’t really need fifty thousand a year—nobody does—and there are hundreds of people just like me, and all of

them as helpless and miserable as I was when you came up to see me that awful night. No, a person would never do that sort of thing for money."

"Why would you do it, then?"

"Because of a foolish thing I once believed. A thing so childish, so plainly wrong that I can't say it, not even now, not even to you."

"After all that, surely you're going to tell me——"

"No, really, I'm not—not you or anybody else. Anyhow, I assure you it's not of the slightest importance any more. I don't believe it now, I don't even think of it. But I do feel better since I've confessed all the sins that make me think I'm dying of t.b., cancer, brain fever, pneumonia in winter, polio in summer. Come to think of it——" She stood up and stretched and laughed. "Come to think of it, it's just about polio season now. Are you thirsty? Shall I call up for something? A martini? A Manhattan? Or a cup of tea, Sophie, a cup of tea. . . ."

For an instant she gazed at me, and her face was the childish, vulnerable, suffering face that belonged to the past. Then she turned and walked with perfect composure, perfect dignity, to the telephone. "Room service," she said in a cool voice. "A pot of tea with lemon, please—service for two—and four of those Danish pastries with apricots on top."

While we waited for the order she sat on the arm of the sofa, thrusting one foot forward and studying the folds of gray taffeta and the red toe of her lounging slipper. She looked as calm and self-possessed as she had looked in the Wedgewood Room behind the larkspur

and the roses, and her conversation was just such conversation as one might expect from a witty and poised young woman who had come back, happy and famous, to the city of her birth. The gangling director really hadn't changed much, had he? She had brought some prints for me, big enough to hang above a sofa or a mantel, and she hoped they wouldn't clash with my color scheme. She had some books for Philip and several things for each of the children. When could she see us? Could she come to our house for dinner one evening this week? Could she come, say, tomorrow? She would love to come tomorrow, especially if I would have a consecrated chicken. The chicken in the Wedgewood Room had definitely not been consecrated. Besides, eating in the public eye like that always made her a little sick. She certainly did like the velvet roses on my hat. She had a plan to tell me about. It was a happy plan, and she'd save it for the tea. . . .

The waiter came and went, leaving us with a folding table, the ordered items, and more china, linen, and silver than any number of Danish pastries could call for. She settled herself in an armchair and poured the tea with a measured grace that must have been the product of years of pouring tea on formal occasions. Then she asked me once more, in so grave a voice that I was forced to give her a grave answer, whether I was still fond of her.

"You ought to know by this time that I'm fond of you, Alexandra."

"I'm asking for a reason. I know you're fond of me.

But I was wondering if you'd like it if I lived here again."

The notion struck me as preposterous. The frightened child, the tormented adolescent—they had been my companions. But this elegant creature following me about in a gray taffeta gown, this first lady of the stage sitting in my living room, this unfamiliar being carrying her nameless sorrows and incomprehensible sins into my house . . . "Why should you want to live here again?" I said.

She flushed. "Well, I was thinking of setting up a place here and not doing anything at all next season. I really ought to live away from New York. I'm terribly tired, and the doctor says I simply have to take a rest."

The flush faded on her cheeks, and it was not herself—it was the lovely portrait of herself—that sat on the other side of the folding table for the next half hour, smiling serenely and discussing the happy plan. The events which had given rise to that plan had not been happy. She had made a break—a real break, a very bad one—two months ago. Right in the middle of the trial scene in *Saint Joan*, she had looked out at the audience, and there in the front row she had seen a little old man, bald and toothless, devouring her, positively devouring her with his eyes. She could not explain it—the sight of him had affected her in the strangest way—it was at once laughable and terrible, overwhelmingly funny and fathomlessly sad. She had quite forgotten where she was and had burst out laughing—things would have been twice as bad if a very

decent actor hadn't seen what was going to happen and stepped in between her and the audience. Then, later, at another performance, she had thought she was going to laugh like that again, for no reason at all. And then again, just two weeks ago. . . . After that she decided that the doctor was right, she did need a rest.

So she had been thinking about coming home. She had been thinking of buying a house somewhere in this city, a house with a garden, a big, everlasting, manorial house which would give the illusion of an unbroken succession of generations. Perhaps her mother and father would come back to live with her. She had written to them about it. Her father didn't want to give up his job, but then he was almost old enough to retire. They could live in such a house all year round, putting in with flower beds and making curtains and polishing the wood. She could come to live in it herself between one part and another. She was not as strong as she had been three or four years ago; after every long run, now, she meant to rest. I could come to see her on summer afternoons. I could bring the children with me, and they would play in the garden, with Isabelle to look after them, while we two talked together. There were good years yet, Sophie. There were many good years yet, and after a person passed thirty-five, he ought to learn to live quietly and contentedly in his own home. . . .

My heart should have leaped up, but it remained heavy. The lost years running like water through my fingers, the changed, immobile face on the other side

of the table—I brooded on them and had to force myself to nod and smile.

“Shall I do it, Sophie? Tell me honestly and tell me quickly, darling. It’s almost half-past five, and all day tomorrow I’ll be interviewed and rushed around.”

I told her, quickly, at least, that nothing in the world could make me happier than the thought of having her back home.

She left the subject then and talked of other matters: When did we want to see *Saint Joan*? She’d get a pair of very good tickets for us, of course. Opening night was never as good as it was supposed to be—the cast played coldly to an unfamiliar house—and besides, I was probably tired. Second night was more dependable. How would we like to go down with her tomorrow, after we’d all had dinner together? Was there anybody we knew who wanted a ticket? She had a very good seventh-row seat for Wednesday night.

I claimed the ticket for Les Talbot. The thought of him was strangely gratifying. I would have liked to stop at his apartment on the way home. I wanted his presence as a person wants the shadowy stillness of his own parlor after a long walk in the dazzling sun. *His* sins were within the limits of my comprehension; *his* claims were easily answered; with *him*, it was possible to be both alive and at peace.

“Have I ever met your friend?” she said.

“No, but he saw your picture in the paper, and he says you’re the most beautiful woman in the world.”

“Some people are born beautiful and others make themselves beautiful. The ones who were born beauti-

ful—they walk about as if they were gods, but the others always know. . . .”

There were three short raps on the door. She took me in her arms and kissed me. “There,” she said, “now we can let Isabelle come in.” But she lingered, holding my hands until the new serenity dropped away from her face and her eyes were wet and bright. “Do you really want me here, darling?”

“Of course I want you.”

“All right, then. I believe you. Good-by until tomorrow night.”

I might have gone up to Les’s studio on Tuesday afternoon to leave his ticket with him, but I sent Susie instead. The desire to run to him from Alexandra seemed reprehensible; if I could not dedicate a single week to her, I thought, I had reason to be ashamed of myself. I fixed a basket for Susie to take with her—six blue iris from the back yard, a book that Les had wanted to borrow from Philip, and a generous piece of the lemon cake that I had baked for the company supper—consecrated chicken, homemade noodles, and peas—which we were having on Tuesday night. I also gave Susie specific instructions to say that we would see him as usual on Sunday morning—a message which contained a faint implication that he’d better not just drop in.

Susie came back about an hour later and announced that her Uncle Les was painting a cranky old lady with a mean cat that didn’t want to be petted. He had said thanks for the cake, thanks for the iris, thanks for the

ticket, thanks for the book. He had sent her to the drugstore for a bottle of toothache drops because he had a toothache—his cheek was red. He'd said he'd go to the dentist's tomorrow before he went to the play. I told Susie it was time she went to the dentist, and the thought of that calamity sent her into the back yard. I called through the window to ask her whether she'd reminded him about Sunday. "Oh, yes," she said. "And he wanted me to tell you this—let's see if I can remember it: He won't barge in until your girl friend has flown the coop."

"All right," I said, "all right."

Les Talbot was driven completely out of my head by our dinner party with Alexandra and the performance of *Saint Joan* which followed it. The children were charmed with her, and she was charmed with the children; her reminiscences of the old days were witty, warm, and tender; and she talked so cheerfully and sensibly about her intention of buying a house that I was ashamed of my former doubts. Once you had grown accustomed to it, her new guise was not really disturbing. If Philip seemed uneasy in her presence, that fact did not trouble me in the least. Only yesterday I had felt foolishly uneasy, too—on second encounter, his disquietude was bound to pass. It was a thoroughly acceptable Alexandra who took off her shoes and stood on the sofa in order to hold one print after another against the wall for us to see. It was a merry Alexandra who chased a celluloid duck around in the bathtub for Jonathan's amusement, and sent Susie into fits of laughter with new variations on nursery rhymes:

“Mary, Mary, quite contrary,
How does your garden grow?
With silver bells and cockle shells,
And one damned old petunia.”

And it was something very like the old Alexandra who held on to my hand in the cab all the way to the theater, and who, late as she was, stopped at the stage door to kiss each of us.

As for the performance—it was such that I went backstage after the show and asked her for three more tickets. I would arrange my life so that I could see the play again, again, and yet again. I was troubled for the first time by the realization that her art was a perishable art: no photograph or recording could catch and hold it; like the body out of which it issued, it was vulnerable to time and mortality, and I was determined to make a transitory temple for it in my own remembrance. That week she was to me what she had been for years to the critics—a miracle. All day Thursday I was in an acute state of exasperation because I could induce nobody to release me from my children. My neighbor was quarantined with chicken pox; my sister was going to a wedding; Philip had signed up for a match at the Chess Club and refused to leave his partner in the lurch. I put Susie and Jonathan to bed and brought a sewing box into the parlor. But I got no mending done that night. Somebody rang the door bell, and there was Les at the door, with a box of candy and a dozen daffodils.

“Now don’t alarm yourself unnecessarily, dear,” he

said through the screen. "If anybody's here or is going to be here, if anything of the slightest significance is about to take place, I'll not stick around, I'll just leave my little bribes and depart."

"Don't be silly. Nobody's coming."

"Nobody? That's a damned shame."

"Come on in. What on earth is the matter with your face?"

The left side of it was red and swollen. He laid the candy and the flowers on the sofa, and nursed his jaw with one hand. "Don't criticize my face," he said. "I'm lucky I have a face at all. I thought half of it had been removed. Did you ever have an infected wisdom tooth that had to be dug out from under a chunk of bone? No? Well, I hope you do. You deserve it, after sending that poor, innocent child of yours to tell me not to turn up around here until Sunday. That was a very nice thing to do."

"Your jaw looks terrible. Can I get an ice-cap or something to stop the pain?"

"A drink, Sophie. Just get me a good, stiff drink. Whisky, I mean. The dentist—a great-hearted humanist—suggests the use of alcohol on these occasions, and it's wonderful, it stops everything but a minor throb, and that I can put up with, provided I'm in amusing company. Go get me a drink, dear. It won't hurt me, I'm not in the least afraid of it any more. I've been drinking like a perfect gentleman—one shot every two hours—ever since I walked out of the play last night."

While I was taking the whisky from the top shelf of the kitchen cupboard, I wondered whether his exuber-

ance was due to liquor, the play, or the nervous relief that comes after an excruciating experience. "Was it bad, getting the tooth out?" I called to him.

"Bad? It was agonizing. The dentist worked on me for almost an hour, then gave up and handed me over to a bone surgeon, and that gentle soul chiseled at me from eight until eight-forty—I watched the clock. I thought my head was coming off, and, furthermore, I missed the first act of *Saint Joan*."

"How did you like it?—the play, I mean."

"Of that we will discourse later, when we don't have to shout. Do you keep your liquor in a safe around here? You've been gone an inexcusable amount of time, you know."

I came in and found him supplementing a bouquet of dying iris with his daffodils. "I bought the flowers for my own delectation, of course," he said. "But it was very good of me to bring the candy. I brought it exclusively for you and the brats. Myself, I could no more put a sweet thing into my disgusting mouth than——" He stopped and looked at me almost sternly. "Sophie, tell me the truth, isn't she going to drop in here later, some time tonight?"

"Alexandra? Why, no, dear, she's not coming. She's having lunch with me at the Ramsay tomorrow, and Philip and I are eating dinner with her on Saturday. But she won't be coming out to the house any more this trip. She has the matinee, you know, and she's pretty tired, and she's taking the train on Saturday night."

He took the whisky, raised it halfway to his lips, and, without touching it, set it down among the

scattered daffodils. "Then it won't be possible for me to meet her?"

"Well, look, Les, I don't know, we——"

"Then you'll let her go for good without my even——"

"She's not going for good. She'll be back in July. She's buying a house in town. She's going to take a year off and spend it here."

He sat down on the sofa and began to stick the daffodils into the vase, staring all the while at the opposite wall. Then such a smile as I have seen only on the faces of children—to whom all miracles are possibilities—spread over his face and lighted his eyes. "When she comes back in July—you'll let me meet her then?"

"Of course, if you want to. But why——"

It was needless for me to ask, and needless for him to answer. He took the whisky and sipped it slowly, until he had emptied the little glass. Then he came and set the glass in my hand, as if it were a precious thing. "Believe me, Sophie, I'm telling you God's honest truth," he said. "I love her. I'm in love."

I took up a pair of socks and a darning needle, in protest against the ecstasy in his eyes. Knowing perfectly well that his passion was real, predestined, and unalterable, I said that nobody fell in love like that, he was crazy, he'd better pull himself together before he made an ass of himself.

He did not answer, plainly because he did not find my comment worth answering. He went back to the sofa and began again his gentle, absent-minded dealings

with the flowers. I watched him covertly, holding the unthreaded needle; and I realized with an unexpected pang that he was in every way desirable—rich in promise, gallant and tender, very good to behold and touch, such a man as any woman, even a well-contented woman. . . .

“All right, let’s say that you love her,” I said.

“I know she’s not married, but does she—go around with anybody? I mean, does she have a lover?”

If he was child enough to fall in love with a fairy princess at first sight, he might be child enough to expect chastity. “No, she’s not married, she was never married.”

“That wasn’t what I asked you.”

I remembered the listless voice saying there had been others before and would be others after. . . . She was what she was, and I would not belittle or betray her by presenting her in a tawdry veil of excuses or lies. I laid the darning on the floor and looked unflinchingly into his face. “Of course she’s had a lover—two lovers—for all I know, a dozen lovers. She’s not a child.”

“I’d have to be very stupid to take her for a child,” he said. “Sometimes she looks like a child—enough like a child to break your heart. But her face is as beautiful as it is simply because it’s marked all over with deep, sad, marvelous wisdom. A person only has to look at her once to see how much she knows.”

And only such young and blessed fools as yourself, my boy, could imagine that there is anything but ashes at the core of such apples of knowledge as she has been

eating all these years. It's not so good as you choose to think—that deep, sad, marvelous wisdom. Better for you if she had never known the sort of thing she knows. . . .

“And she's so beautiful, Sophie, she's so goddamned beautiful—— Tell me, is she with anybody now? Is there anybody she——”

“No, Les, she's not with anybody. So far as I know, she was in love, really in love, just once in her life, and that was years ago.”

“I know I'm being utterly silly, I know you can't possibly give me an answer to this, but do you think there's the slightest chance that she—that I . . .”

He stood behind the sofa with a daffodil in his hand, looking at once splendid and ridiculous. I conjured up the others—the soft, opulent one and the sour and sickly one. Then I shut them out of my consciousness and thought only of Leslie Talbot and Alexandra Hill, standing side by side, his hand supporting the small of her narrow, childish back. It was right, it was utterly right, and maybe for once something would come out right in this miserable world.

He stuck the last of the daffodils into the vase, crossed the room, pushed the darning out of the way, and sat down on the floor at my feet. He said nothing, only stared at me and laid his hand on my knee.

“Don't look at me like that,” I said. “How should I know what'll happen? She might, and she might not. I can't tell.”

He patted my knee, turned his head, and looked through the open May window at the new leaves on the

maples. Spring was there, resurrection was there, the bright, deceitful angel, holding out a liar's gift to snare a fool. And, being twenty-seven, he reached for the spurious promise. "What an evening!" he said, and smiled.

No returning beloved was ever more ardently awaited than she—and no woman in her middle years ever turned more unresponsive looks upon a young and desirable lover. If she was lively and easy at our suppers on Fridays, it needed only his whistle at the screen door to transform her into the gracious statue that had sat at the T-shaped table behind the larkspur and the roses. Whenever she could do so without obvious unkindness, she avoided him. She was forever retreating with me into a corner of our parlor, where she would chatter at a great rate about her new house—the magnificent garden, the manorial fireplace, the ten years' growth of ivy on the walls—until he moved in her direction. Then every trace of spontaneity would disappear from her conversation, and her sentences, usually random and breathless, would take on a lifeless formality. The well-considered comments that she made to him on the subject of his painting sounded grave and remote, even though they were unquestionably complimentary and kind. When he tried to break down her reserve with witty sallies, her reaction was so feeble that he looked foolish and lost his natural charm. Since she could not call him "Mr. Talbot" after the first two or three evenings, and since it was plainly difficult for her to use his first name, she simply reduced

conversation with him to the unavoidable minimum.

I was sure that her attitude could not be taken for indifference, although Les, when he referred to it in our private conversations, always spoke of it as such. She was not unconcerned with him—she was too acutely aware of his presence for that. She sat erect and solemn whenever she felt his eyes upon her, and, even when the sound of his voice came in from another room, I could see that she was listening. Those few times when he dared to seat himself on the floor in front of her chair, she drew her knees backward so as to avoid contact with his shoulders, and when she passed him a plate or took one of his cigarettes, she made very sure that she did not graze his hand. He was baffled; he was ashamed; and, after a month of that sort of thing, he told me that his attentions were plainly causing her nothing but annoyance, and that she was being courteous only for my sake.

That interpretation of her behavior seemed reasonable enough, but I could not accept it. She had always treated her rejected lovers with marked consideration; I remembered her companionable hand on Willie Connerth's sleeve. I knew, too, that she had accepted two presents from Les—a yellow rose and an old pewter jug; she had worn the rose and set the jug on her new buffet; and I doubted that she would use a gift if she disliked the giver. Furthermore, if she had felt a real distaste for him, she would scarcely have consented when he asked her to sit for her portrait. In spite of the fact that she was busy decorating her house, she went to his studio every Tuesday and Saturday afternoon.

Not that her presence there was any satisfaction to him. He told me after the fourth session that he felt pretty much as if he were painting her ghost.

Still, I hoped that something would come of the hours they spent together under his skylight, and I was not displeased to hear that the portrait was not going well. I even suspected him of weaving a sort of Penelope's web when she told me that every session was the same—he put the paint on in the afternoon and scraped it off at night. So long as they were alone together, there was the possibility of intimacy; she might even find that it was good to have him tilt her head a little to one side or rearrange her hair. So I was bitterly disappointed when she wandered into my house soon after lunch one Tuesday in August, and said that Philip was on his vacation and could watch the children, and wouldn't I please come up and chat with her while she sat for Les this afternoon?

"I'd like to, Alexandra, but I promised Susie I'd bake a cake. She's having a party tomorrow, and I——"

"Why should you bake on a hot afternoon like this? Let me buy a cake for Susie's party, one of those magnificent ones with roses all over it in the French bakery. Come along with me, please."

"Les didn't ask me."

"Oh, he won't mind." She blushed. She was always, at best, a flustered, nervous liar.

"Do you really dislike him as much as all that?"

"As much as all what? I don't dislike him at all. Whatever made you think I did? He's very nice. It's only that we get awfully dull, sitting up there by our-

selves. We never say anything. Things would go better if you were there."

"Why the devil can't the two of you talk to each other?"

It was a hazardous question, and it received an angry answer. "Perhaps because we've exhausted all the available inanities."

"If that's the case, I'm sure it's no fault of his. He and I have been talking more or less intelligently over a period of years."

"That's what I thought. That's why I asked you to come."

"I'd rather not, I——"

"All right, Sophie, stay home if you want to. But if you do, I'll call him up and tell him I can't come myself."

I went into the bedroom and got my purse and hat. Not because of her speech—that was childish—— Only because I had seen her wringing her hands. In the constrained silence that was between us all the way to his studio, I kept thinking: No, she doesn't dislike him, and she isn't indifferent. She's afraid of him, that's it, she's afraid. . . .

I had realized for weeks that he was unhappy, tense, driven almost to desperation by his futile pursuit. But it was only when he opened the door and saw me standing there that I knew the extent of his wretchedness. The hangdog look crept into his surprised, unwelcoming eyes. He flushed and swallowed before he could find his voice. "Oh—were you two having lunch together or something?" he said.

She looked so cool and poised, walking past him in her classic white dress, he looked so vulnerable and ashamed in his paint-spotted sport shirt and dungarees that I had an almost irresistible impulse to slap her in the face.

"No," she said, settling herself in the tall Windsor chair under the skylight and carefully arranging her skirt around her knees. "I dropped in at Sophie's and asked her to come along. I didn't think you'd mind."

"Mind? Me? God, no! I don't mind at all. I'm so delighted I can scarcely contain myself." He walked across the room, picked up his palette, and strode back to the easel. Above the open collar of his blue shirt, his adam's apple was working up and down. He was exposing me to the worst sort of embarrassment, but I could not blame him. It was evident that he had quite lost grip on himself. Still, after making a few wild daubs at the canvas, he put aside his brush and palette, pulled up a chair to the right of the easel, and told me in a rueful voice to make myself as comfortable as I could. I laid my hat and purse on his Swedish table and sat down. The studio was oppressively quiet and almost intolerably hot from the stream of midsummer sun that poured through the skylight, straight upon her head. The roses—he had brought them from the florist's this morning and had set them in little copper vases in every corner of the room that her remote glance might rest upon—the roses had drooped and were shedding their petals. The sand-colored rug, the pale furniture, the beige draperies—all of them were turned by the pitiless light to the color of desert dust. I felt torpid and

depressed; nothing that came to my mind seemed worth the saying; and the two of them—she, erect and motionless on her pedestal, and he, shaky and sweating in front of his easel—maintained a charged silence.

Some complimentary remark about the portrait might have lessened the tension, but any such praise would have been an obvious lie. Each of the twenty or thirty canvases scattered around his studio was a living creation. This one on the easel was a zombi, a rigid, expressionless likeness of the sitter—a dead Alexandra, with a doll's mouth. Yet, if I had entertained the notion that he was painting aimlessly in order to hold her for a few more sittings, I had made a serious mistake. He was painting savagely and in dead earnest. He was working so hard that the sweat rolled over his temple and down his tensed jaw. He was painting her as desperately, as fruitlessly, as shamefully as he had pursued her. And for the first time, seeing him slash the color on and rub it off, seeing the shifting, bewildered look in his pale eyes, I remembered how he had said, "I was in the hospital for a while myself."

He painted in silence for the better part of half an hour. Then he stepped back and wiped his hands with a cloth that smelled of turpentine. He looked first at the picture and then at the sitter; and it seemed to me that he was ready to give up. "Tell me something, will you, Alexandra? Are all actresses like you?" he said.

"Like me?" She started. "How do you mean?"

"Are they only warm and alive and giving when you see them on the stage? And when you get them in

an ordinary living room, do they all go cold and turn into ghosts?"

Her face went white. "That depends," she said.

"That's very enlightening. Depends on what?" He was painting again, whipping the brush up and down over cold white flesh and lusterless drapery.

"On what sort of actors they are and what sort of lives they've had. It's a silly question anyway. Are all housewives like Sophie? Are all mathematicians like Philip? Are all painters like you?" Her hands were picking at the pleats in her skirt, and her cheeks were suddenly red. "I can't exactly imagine Fra Angelico tearing around the room in a rage or slapping on the paint like that or——"

"If I'm slapping on the paint, God knows I have my reasons!"

"If I go cold in an ordinary living room, God knows I have my reasons, too."

"My reasons are pretty obvious, I'm afraid. What reasons *you* could have, I'm sure I don't know."

Her brief flare-up was spent. Her mouth began to tremble, tears stood in her eyes, and in the fierce brightness her face looked peaked and prematurely old. "You're calling me to account, aren't you?" she said. "Well, maybe you've a right to, I suppose I do act like a ghost. But I wasn't always like this, was I, Sophie? Before I was famous, I was different. I used to have a lot of foolish notions. When I was a child, I thought—oh, it's ridiculous and you can laugh at it, if you like—I thought that people would love you if you were famous. That's what I worked for all those years."

He laid aside one brush, took up another, and painted, very slowly and with care, a patch of bluish shadow on her brow.

"Am I spoiling the portrait, talking like this?"

"No, Alexandra, not at all."

"All right, there's something more I want to tell you. Fame and love—believe me, they have nothing to do with each other. If what you're trying for is greatness, then you might as well give up the thought of being loved. People will envy you for your glory, they'll use you for your power, they'll applaud you for your minor skills—the little, worthless, obvious skills that they can understand. But they're afraid, they're deathly afraid of the uncompromising honesty that made you what you are. To be honest is to be rejected. Nobody wants you—nobody, that is, but Sophie. . . ."

He opened his mouth to protest, but she begged his silence, gently and humbly, with a raised hand. "You remember what Joan says in the trial scene. That line about truth—oh, you must remember it—it was the line that made me choose the play. She says that anybody who tells the truth is bound to be hanged. No, you can't tell the truth, not out of your own mouth, not in this world. If you've got to tell the truth, tell it in your art. Get rid of it in your paintings, work it off on the stage. People will accept you then, they'll even applaud you. It salves their conscience to look the truth in the face for a certain fixed number of minutes—provided, of course, that they can go home afterward and forget. But who would want us as we really are, in an ordinary living room? We make less trouble—

for ourselves and for the others—if we behave like ghosts.”

“Then there’s no choice?”

“Oh, yes, there’s another choice, there’s a very obvious choice. You can always behave as if you didn’t know the truth about other people and about yourself. If you do that, you’ll get along well enough—unless, of course, the lost gods of your childhood visit you with imaginary diseases and threaten you with a reckoning in the hour of your death. You can rationalize and equivocate and make one allowance after the other, until black is dirty gray and white is dirty gray and you can’t distinguish any more between a human being and a dog. In that case, you’ll be acceptable, they’ll let you live in their rotten world. Myself, I prefer to be what you call a ghost.”

He moved to one side of the easel and looked up at her. “And what about me?” he said. “Am I bound to turn into a ghost?”

“You? No, darling, not yet. You know what you are—sound and unspoiled and blessedly young.” She leaned forward, and her face was made mobile and delicate by an uncontrollable surge of tenderness. “No, the change hasn’t come over you yet. You have time, plenty of time, maybe ten years. And God keep you out of reach of any miserable sinner who would lessen your time by a year, a day, an hour. . . . But work, for God’s sake, work before the change sets in. Do what you can before the inside death creeps out and begins to show itself in the way you draw a line. Paint—oh, but you’ll paint—you’ll find in the end there’s nothing else that

seems worth doing—nothing else in which you can be yourself.”

He took his courage in his hands. “Then I’ve been sadly mistaken,” he said.

“Mistaken? How?”

“I also had a foolish notion. Until this day, I thought—oh, it’s ridiculous, and you can laugh at it if you like—but I thought that a man could also be himself with his beloved.”

“Dear Les,” she said, leaning forward and looking at him with bright, wet eyes, “dear, generous Les, I’m old, I’m well past thirty now, I know a great deal about love. I know, for instance, that a woman can never be entirely honest if she wants to keep her lover. I know that there’s nothing so burdensome to a man as the assurance of unchangeable and everlasting love. No man will stay with a woman unless she suppresses every part of her nature except the part he wants to see.”

He wheeled around then and looked at me, his face transported. “Is that it, Sophie? Is that the way it’s been?” he said. “Has there never been anybody who could take her for what she is? All her life has she been in the hands of children and hypocrites?”

She made a whimpering sound, and both of us glanced up at her. She was not beautiful in the violent light. For the first time since her return, I saw her face pinched and wrinkled—a simian face, helpless and old. “Alexandra,” he said, “my poor Alexandra,” and crossed the room slowly, lest she should be startled. “You’re worn out, you’re exhausted, you’ve been sitting

in the sun for more than an hour." He took his handkerchief, rumpled and paint-spotted, from the pocket of his dungarees, and wiped her face. She sat passive and smiling until his hand moved down, with infinite gentleness, toward her chin; and then she turned her head and brushed his fingers with her lips.

I do not believe they returned to the portrait again that afternoon. I know they gave no thought to me—did not see me walk across the room to take my purse and hat from the table, did not hear the creak of the hinges as I opened the door. I did not dare to close the door behind me, and I caught sight of them through the doorway as I went down the stairs. She had risen, and they were standing face to face. And I imagined that they were still standing so, gazing into each other's eyes like wonderstruck children, long after I had crossed the noisy avenue and turned my face toward my own quiet street.

No lost god of my childhood threatens me with a reckoning in the hour of my death. No avenger waits to chastise me for my frailties in the blank quiet on the other side of my grave. If there is any arraignment to be done, I must arraign myself; and for that very reason, these winter nights when I cannot sleep, I must look sternly at my own heart. It was I who brought them together—there is no denying that. Am I guilty also of turning my head aside, of refusing to see? In my affection for the young Alexandra who came to me on a Friday evening, proud of her clerical collar and her newly polished shoes, did I shut my heart utterly

against the claims of the poor sybil with the wise, still face? In my hopes for their happiness, did I behave like a child who insists that the sun will shine on a holiday, and refuses to see the ominous piling up of clouds, the heat lightning flickering over the tops of the distant trees? Did I listen too readily to the onlookers—Isabelle and the mild, graying mother who had come down for such a nice little visit to the new house. Alexandra was so happy. They made such a lovely couple. Just look at them sitting out there beside the fish pond—they haven't moved for hours—he's here at breakfast and never lets her out of sight until the middle of the night.

Certainly he bore himself like an exultant lover. He would not sell the finished portrait, even when the Congress of Womens' Clubs offered him a cool thousand. He wanted it for himself; he actually hung it on the wall that his waking eyes would first rest upon. He was forever singing at the top of his voice a certain passionate, joyous tenor aria from *The Magic Flute*: "*dies Bildnis ist bezaubernd schön.*" He brought her such presents as one gives only to the most cherished beloved: an old French tea cup as thin as an egg shell, a music box which he had painted all over with her favorite flowers, a white lambs'-wool tippet to keep her shoulders warm when she sat reading in bed. Certainly he spent all his waking hours with her. He bought another easel to set in her parlor beside the open casement, and he painted there in the brief interludes between breakfast and a walk in the garden, between lunch and a game of badminton in the court behind the fish pond,

between dinner and the event of the evening. He was discovering what she had discovered before him, back in the days when she had inhabited the mauve and pink living room: the happy lover can do twice as much in half the time. If he seemed thinner and a little more tense, if his eyes were bloodshot now and then, that was to be expected: his ardor was circumscribed; she was too grave and knowing now to run into a man's arms; she was waiting, naturally enough, for her own good hour. And if he never came to chat with me in private now, if he seemed a little nervous and withdrawn when he found himself alone in a room with me, that was no cause for uneasiness. His protracted pursuit had left him sensitive; and no man needs a friend in the year when he has found his beloved.

So, at least, I said to myself when he went with the new shears into the new garden and came back to lighten the solemnity of her paneled parlor with Michaelmas daisies, asters, and marigolds. So I told myself when he called her out of the house that late September morning to look at the first frost. So I assured my unquiet heart when he kindled the first fire under the brick mantel and lay on the sofa with his head in her lap, watching the flickering light on her motionless, subtly smiling face. And yet, now that winter is upon us, now that the dead leaves rattle in the garden and no fire burns behind the panes sealed up in icy fronds and swirls—if I ask myself now, Come, tell the terrible, uncompromising truth: Was he happy? I see his pale eyes glancing elsewhere to avoid my stare; and the inexorable judge within me will accept neither,

"Perhaps," nor, "I cannot tell," but only an unequivocal, "No."

And she—how could I have convinced myself that the sudden loosening of her tongue, the multiple endearments, the breathless sallies and the monkeyshines heralded the return of my old companion? Did I never harbor the suspicion that she advanced toward me in a mask which travestied the long-lost face, only in order to hide the motionless, mournful visage that was her own? We talked less haltingly than we had ever talked before—but I could not have learned less about her if we had not talked at all. Most of our conversations, like the crazy nursery rhymes she taught Susie, began gaily and ended in a rocket of whimsical absurdity.

If once or twice I thought of *miching mallecho*, which means mischief, the quietness that came upon her when she sat with Les on the sofa or lay beside him on the sun-dried grass was enough to drive such forebodings out of my head. I told myself she was happy. At least in his presence she was as happy as any aging woman can be in this difficult world. And I could not ask for a miraculous cure; I could not expect that all the marks of her unhappiness would disappear in the twinkling of an eye. Her desire to prolong a party long after Philip and I had begun to wish ourselves in bed, her reluctance to lock the doors and turn out the lights on Isabelle and herself—that was annoying, but that would pass. Once she had finished with this senseless waiting, once they were married, she would be glad enough to let us go our ways. As for the fact that she seemed more convinced than ever that some nameless

disease was destroying her from within—it was explainable on the grounds that the closer we come to happiness, the greater our fears for what we have to lose. No, she could take her pulse as often as she liked; she could turn sense into nonsense; she could put her arms around Philip's neck and beg him for God's sake not to go home—the devil with the sitter, the devil with his ten-thirty class—she was all right, or would be all right in a very short while. If I asked myself in a transitory fit of doubt whether she was really happy, I countered that question with a series of others: Wasn't she famous? Wasn't she rich? Didn't she have the most ardent and desirable of lovers? Happy? Why on earth shouldn't she be?

I remember that late in September Susie was taken with an obsession for blowing soap bubbles. As soon as she came home from school, she would run into the kitchen for her pipe and her dish of soapy water. Then she would sit on the back porch, blowing one bubble after another over the railing, until supper was on the table. Sometimes I wasted as much as fifteen minutes watching her from the window, fascinated in spite of myself. I studied with absorption the swelling of the delicate globes; I held my breath when they were detached from the pipe; I stared after them as they floated toward the yellowing trees or disappeared against the cool blue. I learned that there was a certain order in the mutations of their coloring: At first they were gray, then they were pink and green, then they were tinged with violet. But they attained their most splendid colors, burnished gold and royal purple, only

in the fraction of a second before they burst. The splendor that comes before the end of things—I was forever finding it in those opulent days. I would see it in the almost painful radiance of an Indian summer afternoon, in a full-blown autumn rose about to drop its petals on the grass. Did I see it in the two of them that October day, deceptively warm and achingly bright, when Susie and Jonathan and I went down to her place to watch the burning of the leaves? Perhaps I did—I recall a sigh-begetting fullness around my heart—perhaps I did, I don't quite know.

While we sat on the porch, waiting for Isabelle to bring out the tea and watching Les and the children throwing the last errant leaves onto the pile, she asked me whether it hadn't worked out exactly the way she had hoped it would, her happy plan. Even if her mother and father hadn't agreed to come down as yet, she had no regrets about the house, it was exactly what she had wanted all her life. Wasn't it good to sit here like this, with the sun in your face? Wasn't it nice that Isabelle had baked a rum cake and had made dozens of little sandwiches for tea? And wasn't Les a darling to spend a whole afternoon cleaning up the lawn? She looked at him across the blown, bloomless plants in the flower beds, and tenderness hushed her chatter and quieted her eyes.

The bonfire must have been burning for more than an hour when the telephone rang. She was slicing the rum cake and telling us how she had wangled the recipe out of the cook in a famous New York restaurant, but she paused when she heard the faraway ringing.

"The first ring was short wasn't it?" she said. "Sometimes it rings like that for long distance—short and long." She cut another slice of the rum cake and laid it on Susie's plate. "Go ahead and eat," she told us. "I'll just run in and see." But before she had opened the front door, Isabelle was on the threshold. "Better hurry up, Miss Alexandra. That's Miss Tessie calling up from New York," she said.

I strained to hear what was said after she went into the house, but the children were arguing so loudly over which had the larger piece of cake that I could not tell whether I imagined or actually heard a low, short cry. I looked at Les, but he did not look at me. He had wiped his face and was ruefully examining the streaks of soot he had left on his handkerchief. It dawned on me then that he had burned the leaves at a heavy cost—he sickened at the smell of smoke, he had placed his chair with the back toward the fire. That realization left me incapable of conversation; the children were silent, too, as they stuffed their mouths with cake; and in the general hush I heard Isabelle saying, "Is anything the matter?" and Alexandra calling back, "No, honey, nothing at all."

Nothing at all? Then why did she walk past the table to the edge of the porch and gaze at the bonfire, the fish pond, the garden as if she were seeing them for the last time? Why did she wander around the table before sitting down at it, touching each of our heads, arranging the part in Susie's hair, putting back the black locks that fell down over her lover's brow? Why was she white in the face, and why did she say, with a

thoroughly artificial lightness, "Do you know what? I've got to go to New York. I've got to leave tomorrow night."

If Les was disturbed by that, he refused to admit his uneasiness, even to himself. He said only, "All right, darling. Don't stay too long." It was I who said, "What for?"

She took up her fork and began to chop at her slice of cake. "To do something I've got to do. To take care of something that wasn't finished. It's a long, dreary, involved business. I certainly hope you aren't going to make me explain."

"No, Sophie, don't," Les said. "If it's anything like the business call she explained to me, you'll know less when she's through than you did before." He reached across the table and touched her hand. "Let me get you a jacket, darling. It's getting chilly. You're cold, your hands are terribly cold."

I remember thinking once or twice that it was lucky they had burned the leaves before the weather changed. The night of her departure, there was an iridescent halo around the watery moon, and during the three days of her absence, we were paid off for our Indian summer holiday with a cold, continual rain. By Saturday, the rain had become thoroughly disheartening. The house was tracked up with mud, and I was so exasperated by the prospect of months of bad weather with Susie and Jonathan both under my feet, that I made Philip take them to the Museum to see the stuffed birds and the dinosaurs. Yet when they were gone I was depressed

by the silence and the emptiness. The living room was wretchedly cold—there was something the matter with the furnace—and I laid the sewing by and lighted the artificial logs under our mantel. I was on my knees, trying to enjoy the feeble run and sputter of those unsatisfactory flames, when the telephone rang. The voice was Les's. "Sophie, are you by any chance alone?" he said.

"Why, yes, it just so happens that Philip's taken the kids to the Museum. They're going to see——"

"Can I come over?"

"Certainly, if you want to." My voice was cool. He had hurt my feelings by breaking in on me, and I did not relish the prospect of filling up a dull afternoon for him on such short notice. "Have you heard yet when Alexandra's coming back?"

"She's back. She came in last night."

"She's back? Why didn't she——"

"Listen, Sophie, can I come over right away?"

I knew now that it was not rudeness; it was urgency. "Of course, come right ahead."

To that I got no reply but the click of the receiver on the other end of the line. Maybe I ought to telephone her, I thought. Yet his voice had conveyed the impression that something was the matter, and I decided to wait and see.

I had been sitting on the floor in front of the logs for some twenty minutes when he opened the front door and came in. The sight of him was shocking—he was coatless, bareheaded, drenched to the skin, and trembling with cold.

"Are you crazy?" I said. "Walking around on a day like this without a coat!"

He said nothing. He stood in the doorway, staring at me, and, in the bleak light of the parlor, I had a frightening illusion of a blank face, alive only insofar as it had a pair of pale, shifting, bloodshot eyes.

"You didn't walk all the way over here, did you?"

He shook his head.

"Well, what in the devil have you been doing to yourself?"

He put one hand to his jaw and steadied it. "For the last hour I've been walking around after Alexandra, trying to make her come in out of the garden."

"In this rain?"

"Yes, in this rain."

The implication of madness was so strong and so terrifying that I could not cope with it. "Is she still walking around out there?" I said imbecilically.

"No. Isabelle came out to get her. Isabelle made her go in." He came up to the hearth, looking so wild-eyed that I involuntarily drew back. "*I'm* all right, Sophie," he said. "*She's* the crazy one. Will I ruin your rug if I sit down in front of the fire?"

"No, of course not, don't be silly. You'd better take off your shoes and dry your feet. You'd better let me get you a—— For God's sake, Les, tell me, what's the matter with the two of you?"

He shivered and then sat motionless, his elbows on his knees and his fists thrust into his eyes. "If you'll just listen, I'll try to tell you. She came back last night, but she didn't telephone me. She didn't call this morn-

ing, either. If I hadn't called Isabelle to find out when she was coming in, I don't know when. . . . Anyhow, I phoned Isabelle, and Isabelle said she was there, and she called to Isabelle to tell me that I shouldn't come over before two this afternoon. I was upset by that—I shouldn't have been, I should have kept my head—but I was upset, and I made up my mind I'd have it out with her once and for all. I intended to make her say when she was going to marry me—I had the ring, I even took the ring. And when I got there—Jesus Christ, Sophie, I'm telling you, she's mad, she's crazier than I am, she's as crazy as Frances ever was, she——”

I laid my hand on his elbow, but he jerked away. “I'm sorry,” he said. “I feel raw and sore all over. I can't stand to be touched.”

“What happened? Did she say she wouldn't get married?”

“Wouldn't get married? She gave me to understand that if I'd ever had the faintest notion we'd get married, I was a damned fool——”

“But that doesn't sound like her at all. I'm sure you didn't understand——”

“Oh, I understood all right. The way she put it, not even an idiot could have failed to understand. She said she didn't love me, never had loved me, never would love me. And when I told her she had given me good reason to think otherwise, she laughed in my face. Honest to God, Sophie, she laughed in my face and said I was the more deceived.”

I started up.

"Where are you going?"

"To telephone her, to get her to explain."

"No, don't do that, don't bother. She meant what she said. There's nothing to explain."

"But really, Les, I can't believe it."

"I couldn't either, at first. But I believe it now. I caught hold of her hands and tried to kiss her, and that was a terrible mistake. She tore her hands away from me and ran out into the garden just the way she was, in that thin blue housecoat, and I ran after her, trying to reason with her, begging her to come back, and we went on like that——Christ, it seemed like hours, back and forth, through the bushes, in the mud. I tried to scare her. You know how afraid she is of getting pneumonia. I told her she'd get pneumonia, and she turned around and laughed and said she hoped she would."

"She's out of her head."

"Sane or crazy, it makes no difference. She hates me. She can't bear to have me get near her. She made a fist and struck at me when I tried to hold her arms. She hates my guts."

I had a vivid image of Alexandra, in a drenched blue housecoat, turning upon him in front of a clump of dripping bushes, her hands clenched, her hair disordered, her face twisted with rage. It was insane and impossible; I closed my eyes against it; she had never looked like that, never could. "Excuse me a minute," I said, and walked out into the hall and dialed her number on the telephone.

The toneless ringing sound came through twice, four times, six times, so many times that the operator told

me, "I'm sorry, your number does not answer now." I hung up the phone and dialed again, with the same result. I went into the living room and found him in his bare feet, spreading his wet socks before the fire. "It's no use, Sophie," he said. "She's doing exactly what she said she would."

"What did she say she'd do?"

"She said I could ring her all night if I wanted—she wasn't going to answer the phone."

I took up last night's newspaper, and, in a kind of daze, filled the insides of his shoes with crumpled sheets of it. "Something's gone wrong, something's happened. Look, Les, did you find out what she did up in New York?"

He swallowed and turned crimson. He looked at the fire, the hearth, the rug, his own bare feet. "No, I haven't the slightest idea what she did up there," he said.

"Why don't you lie down on the sofa and cover up for a bit? I'll run over to her place—it won't take half an hour if I can get a cab—and I'll see if I can't——"

He wheeled the whole upper part of his body in my direction. "Don't dare to do anything of the kind! It's not your affair!" And his face was as fearful as the image of her face which I had seen against the dripping bushes. The mouth was loose and trembling. The eyes were one pale blaze of rage.

"All right, Les, I won't," I said.

"It's useless, she's finished." He bowed his face on his hands and spoke through spread fingers in a voice made almost inarticulate by weeping. "Whatever she

did in New York—and I don't know exactly what she did—was enough to alienate her from me forever. I asked her about it. Just before Isabelle came out, I asked her, and do you know what she said? She said it was none of my goddamned business. She said she could do whatever she wanted—*with whomever she wanted*—any damn time she pleased.”

He stood up, stifling his sobs, and tore off his soaking shirt. He flung himself onto the sofa with his face pressed into the back of it, and lay there, crying and shuddering, making it plain, by his hunched and wary position, that he could not bear to be touched. I went to the bedroom and brought back a down comfort. I waited several minutes before I found courage to spread it over him, but when the folds of it touched his body, he did not move. I put his clothes closer to the fire and sat down in a corner, baffled and afraid to move, until his sobbing stopped and I could tell from his breathing that he had fallen asleep.

Before Philip and the children came back from the Museum, I must have dialed her number ten times. I dialed it until I could hear the dull, exasperating ring in my head even when I was not at the telephone. Something—was it terror or shame or a desire to escape from this wild unreality if only for a couple of hours? —something made me work up an unconvincing story for Philip and the children when they came home. I told them that Les had been caught in the rain during a stroll in the Park and had stopped here on his way back to dry his clothes and get a drink of whisky because he had a chill. Susie and Jonathan were satisfied, but Philip

gave me a long, inquiring glance. "Better keep him well covered. He looks as if he had a fever," he said.

That same evening, after Les had put on his dry clothes, eaten a bowl of soup, and gone back to his studio, I went over to Alexandra's place. The moment I stepped off the trolley, I knew I had come on a futile errand. Her house and garden took up nearly half a block, and the whole area was dark, except for one street light which cast a sickly yellow glare through the drizzling mist. The sight of the solid Tudor structure was somehow appalling. I had never before seen it lightless by night, and the black, unbroken façade looked as though it had undergone some mutilation. I felt as if I were staring into a face whose eyes were blind. The place was obviously empty, and I don't know why I stood on the doorstep, ringing the doorbell over and over. I could make out the sound of the bell through the heavy oak door—a flat, droning sound in the big empty rooms—and after a while it seemed to me that they had exactly the same quality and pitch—the unanswered doorbell and the unanswered telephone.

I tried God knows how many times to get her on the phone that night. It was half past one before I could bring myself to go to bed, and even then I could not sleep. I lay in a dazed, half-dreaming state, comforting my body with the warmth of Philip's body and consoling my mind with images I would never have called up if I had been fully awake. I dreamed a fresh, sunny tomorrow into being. I heard myself ring her doorbell once. I saw her running to the door. She looked young,

she looked happy, she was wearing a pale-blue house-coat, unspotted by rain. There was a cluster of felt forget-me-nots at her waist, and none of them had lost their yellow eyes. She explained to me in crowded, breathless sentences that everything was perfectly all right now between her and Les—no, her and Ken Ellery—no, her and Emmanuel. . . . But I could not follow her explanation; it was broken off in too many places by trills of laughter, and her words were almost drowned out by a tenor voice singing, "*dies Bildnis ist bezaubernd schön.*" Anyway, my shoulder ached because Philip was lying too heavily against it, the quilt wasn't quite long enough to cover my breasts, and the room was dankly, penetratingly cold.

Even though it was Sunday, I had set the alarm clock for eight. It rang itself out without rousing either of us. It became first a doorbell, then a ringing telephone line in my sleep. And when I wakened at ten, I wakened with a crazy conviction that the situation had taken care of itself, simply because the watery sun which had washed my dreams had become a reality on the bedroom window sill. Philip was frying sausages, the children were up and having their breakfast, and I decided to bathe and have a bite myself before going to Alexandra's house. As for the trouble between the lovers—I had found a perfect solution for that, an explanation so obvious that I did not see how I could have overlooked it yesterday. In the course of her visit to New York, she had probably drunk a bit too much, forgotten herself, and fallen into the arms of one of those nameless and insignificant "others." Thereafter, her Puritan con-

science had asserted itself, and she had driven Les off, the more violently because she wanted him so much. But Les would understand, Les could excuse, and, once I had played the peacemaker, they would be reconciled. So, at any rate, I assured myself while I dawdled away the hours between ten and half-past twelve. So I might have thought until the moment I arrived on her doorstep, if it had not been for the call from Isabelle.

It was Susie who picked up the receiver. I could see by her face that she was frightened and could make nothing out of what she heard. After a few seconds, she turned to me and said, "Listen. Somebody's crying in the phone."

It was a wild, terrible, abandoned sound. It was the sound of wailing in the jungle over the body of a dead queen. It was howling and gibberish, and, at its most articulate, it was a palateless distortion of my name.

"Mrs. Sadler, Mrs. Sadler. . . ."

"Isabelle! Is something the matter with Alexandra?"

"Poor Miss Alexandra, she's gone, she's gone."

"Gone? Where?"

"She's gone, Mrs. Sadler. She's dead."

I shrieked, and Philip came running into the hall and tore the phone out of my hands. "Is that you, Isabelle?" he said. "Yes. Yes, we will. Yes, both of us. Right away."

Our neighbor told us to take his car, and our neighbor's wife came over to look after the children. I ran out without a coat, and Philip made me wait while he ran in to get something to put around my shoulders—I

think it was a jacket of his own. He did not speak to me in the car. He did not even touch me. But once, when we turned onto Alexandra's street, he gave me a long, admonitory, penetrating look. It did not tell me, Pull yourself together, or Learn to put up with things as they are. It said only, Love me. In the face of all possible horrors, continue to love me. But I could not accept it, even so. I turned away from him, from the pale, deceitful sun lying on her driveway, from the cat that stalked in her garden, from the Sunday paper on her porch, from the whole hideous, senseless world.

Isabelle let us in. Her face was swollen and blubbered, and the whites of her eyes were netted all over with red. Still, I knew by her stiff shoulders and her constrained and sighing breath that somebody had been there, somebody had made her take herself in hand. First I saw the pale shimmer of sunlight on the curtains, then the sofa and the brick mantelpiece beyond it, then a man's head, the neatly combed and carefully parted blond hair of a stranger, who was kneeling between the sofa and the mantel. He looked up and showed me a grave and pitying face.

"Here's Mrs. Sadler, Doctor," Isabelle said.

The young man rose and fixed me with stern, quiet eyes behind rimless spectacles. "Mrs. Sadler," he said, and fell silent, knowing that I had seen what lay on the sofa—a shape completely covered with the lacy white afghan I had brought to her in her suite at the Ramsay. Halfway down the length of the white wool, above the little hillock made in the cloth by a hanging

hand, was a small, widening stain of red. I did not cry out. "Alexandra?" I said.

"Yes, Mrs. Sadler."

"Is she. . . ."

"Yes, she's dead."

"My God, what——"

Philip came and held me by the arm, so tightly that I was conscious of nothing but the pain.

"She took her own life, Mrs. Sadler. She opened her veins—the big veins in her wrists." He waited for me to speak, but there was nothing to say. "It's an easy death," he said in a quieter voice. "It's a very calm, easy way to go."

Somewhere in the reception hall behind me, Isabelle had begun it again—the awful, primitive mourning that I had heard over the telephone. "It was my fault, it was me," she said. "She gave me last night off, and she told me she didn't want me no more until this afternoon. That's what she told me, before Holy God, and I was out, I was dancing, I was drinking gin, I was sleeping at my girl friend's house, I was sleeping out like a dirty dog. It was me, I did it."

The young doctor sighed and drew his hand across his forehead. "Don't *do* that any more," he said. "It's nobody's fault, nobody did it. She did it herself. It's perfectly obvious why she sent you out for the night."

My eyes left his face and fixed themselves again on the figure shadowed forth under the afghan. The stillness, the unalterable stillness, the growing stain. . . . I felt my knees start to give way, and I made a sound, soft and palateless, like Isabelle's.

"Do you want to see her, Mrs. Sadler?" the doctor said. "Or are you afraid it would upset you too much?"

Afraid of my friend, my poor, miserable—— "No!" I said.

"The coroner'll be coming any time now. Perhaps you'd better look before he comes."

I walked toward the sofa until my thighs touched the back of it. The clean, careful physician's hands drew the lacy wool aside, and there was no reason for fright. He had closed her eyes. Her face was not distorted in the least, only white and drained and inexpressibly tired. The curve of one breast was half visible—the fold of the rain-spotted blue housecoat had slipped aside. He rearranged the neckline with a gentle decency, and put back a loose lock of her hair. "It's a perfectly painless way, exactly like falling asleep." He did not draw the afghan down all the way. I could see dark stains on the carpet and on the side of the sofa, and I knew that he was sparing me the sight of a great deal of blood. "Shall I cover her now?" he said.

"No, wait, just a minute, please."

I came around beside him, bent down, and pressed upon the cold, unliving cheek an unsubstantial kiss. It was no good, it was utterly futile to ask anything of that unresponsive flesh. Let her alone, I thought, and took the corners of the afghan from his hand, and covered her face myself.

"When did she die?" I said.

"Ten—eleven—maybe earlier. It's hard to tell exactly."

"I could have gotten out of bed at eight, I could have come here early this morning——"

"My dear lady——" He laid a warm, practiced hand on mine. "My dear lady, don't torment yourself. When something like this happens, it's quite impossible to place the blame. Everybody is to blame, and nobody is to blame."

"Had you seen her before?"

"Oh, yes, several times. Her physician in New York is a friend of mine. He gave her my name."

An easy, all-absolving explanation rushed into my head. "Was she seriously ill?" I said.

"Lord, no, Mrs. Sadler. She was perfectly sound. Except, of course, that she was nervously exhausted, and had the sort of conscience that never gave her a moment's rest. It's strange that she should have chosen this particular way. I've never come across a similar case. It was a widespread practice among the Romans. . . ."

A line—I could not place it—a line from some poem or play was running through my head: "I am more an antique Roman than a Dane. . . ."

My husband's voice sounded for the first time. "Did you find her just like this?" he said.

"This young lady found her." He nodded in the direction of Isabelle. "She was lying here on the sofa. I think—am I right, Miss, didn't you say there was music on the radio?"

"Not on the radio. On the phonograph. There was just one record on. It kept on playing over and over."

Philip looked in the direction of the phonograph. It had not yet been turned off. The music was silent, but

the amber eye in the middle showed palely in the sun. He crossed the room and reached under the lid, but he turned the wrong switch in the unfamiliar mechanism, and the arm came down on the record again. A warm, soprano voice flooded the room with sound:

*"Komm', süsser Tod,
Komm', liebe Ruh. . . ."*

He groped wildly until he found the main switch. The music stopped. Then he looked at me with the pathetic face of a child guilty of a public misdemeanor, and went to the window and covered his eyes with his hand.

"It must have been a favorite record of hers," the doctor said. "Has it any special significance?"

"It means: 'Come, sweet death. Come, dear rest.' I heard her say once that it made something warm and golden out of death."

"It's good to know she wasn't frightened. I'm glad of that. She was frightened pretty often, you know." Then he stepped back from the sofa and said in an almost inaudible voice, "Well, she'll not be frightened any more."

The mild eyes behind the rimless spectacles were thoughtful and misty, and made it possible for me to weep. I went over to the window and cried, long and quietly, against Philip's chest. The doctor stood beside the brick mantel, courteously waiting for me to be finished with weeping. When I turned back to him, the mask of his profession was between his face and mine, and that was somehow better, that was as it should be.

"What about her parents?" I said.

"They've been notified. This young lady gave me their address, and I wired."

"There's a friend of hers, too, a Miss Tessie March in——"

"Yes, Mrs. Sadler, she's been notified, too."

"My God—Les—he doesn't know yet."

"That'll be all right, Sophie," Philip said. "He's a friend of ours, doctor. We'll take care of that ourselves."

"Good. Maybe it would be better for you, Mrs. Sadler, if you weren't here when the coroner comes. Miss Hill's mother will call you, of course. There's nothing else you can do."

Nothing, I thought, nothing at all. I thanked him and went into the reception hall without looking back.

In the car on the way back to our house, I felt nothing. I looked at the naked boughs, at the families out for their Sunday strolls, at the denuded front porches, dazingly pale and empty in the thin sun. And through that utter blankness, the line, the still-unrecognized line, rang in my head like an unanswered doorbell, like an unanswered telephone. "I am more an antique Roman than a Dane. . . . I am more an antique Roman than a Dane: Here's yet some liquor left." And suddenly I knew. It was Horatio's speech to the dying Hamlet. And with it came Hamlet's reply, shattering and complete:

"O good Horatio, what a wounded name,

Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me!

If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart
Absent thee from felicity a while,
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,
To tell my story."

Yes. But how? How? She had left me no note, no final word, no sign. "I'll never know, I'll never know," I said.

I am pregnant again for the third time. Three times now my will to life has asserted itself: once against poverty, once against war, once against death. For one month of autumn and one month of winter I have been sneering at the incorrigible mother in me, who asserts herself against my will, who turns my grief to her purpose, who takes advantage of my distraction to be fruitful and multiply. I hate her dark, animal cunning, and I do not love the child within me. I have not prepared for it by washing the stored blankets. I have not counted the usable dresses and diapers or made a new lining for the old bassinet. Since this being comes in spite of me, while I am still obsessed with the raw and frosty edge of an open grave, let it prosper as best it can, let it take care of itself.

There are more pressing claims which I cannot satisfy. Whenever I walk toward the desk in our living room, I see, on top of the pile of unanswered letters, the long, formal document from one Emil Schroeder, M.D., St. Francis Hospital, *Rc*: Leslie Talbot, who has these many weeks been under the care of a psychiatrist, who has been transferred to the neurological

pavilion from the private room in the general hospital which he occupied while he was recovering from pneumonia, who accuses himself of two murders, will not get up, will not communicate, and exists at all only because he is being fed intravenously. Dr. Schroeder addresses me in a confidential and trusting tone. He reminds me that there is a history of psychosis in the family, and that the patient has shown a recurrent pattern of guilt-complex and of desire to retreat from an unacceptable world. In the matter of the death of the sister, their information is complete: Frances Talbot was also a patient at St. Francis and was under the care of one of the psychiatrists in residence over a period of several years. But Leslie Talbot's relationship with the unfortunate Miss Hill, and his conviction of responsibility for her suicide, leave those who are trying to help him completely in the dark. Will I, if I possess any information that might throw some light on the problem, come to the hospital for an interview at my earliest convenience? Surely the fact that he refuses to see me in his present depressed state will not in any way affect my wish to help him. Since he has, on a previous occasion, shown himself capable of making a satisfactory recovery from a traumatic experience, there is some reason for hope. Any information, however slight, which I might choose to give would, etc., etc., etc.

But what information have I to give? Who is guilty? And who is innocent? Shall I go to the St. Francis and point out to Emil Schroeder, M.D., that nobody and everybody is to blame? Shall I chop the bitterness into

little pieces and portion it out to be swallowed by all of us—the system which made her poor and rejected, the theater which robbed her of her integrity, the parents who forgot her, the children and hypocrites who were her lovers, the friend who summoned her away from her happiness by a long-distance telephone call, the other friend who slept through the ringing of the alarm clock, the maid who went dancing and drinking, and the poor dreamer who let himself believe that all sorrows can be canceled, all sins absolved by love? What have I to say to Dr. Schroeder? Either ranting or nothing, and I am incapable of ranting, I can only hold my peace.

Hold my peace, and answer all my husband's awkward, tender overtures with silence. I want nothing of him now except what information he can drag up for me out of the past, and I am coldly furious with him that his recollections are sparse and without significance. I am furious, also, with Susie and Jonathan because they must be dressed and fed, smiled at and played with, must—for some incomprehensible reason—be spared all knowledge of the quart of vinegar which they will have to drink for every pint of wine. And when they are out of my way, in the long evenings when Philip has retreated into silence and they are asleep, my rage does not subside. It goes out against the mild mother and the gray father who have gone back to the coziness of the little town after weeping the required number of tears by that raw grave. It flies out at Tessie March who summoned the lost one away at such an unseasonable hour. It even dries up all pity

for poor Les, who, mad as he is, has yet found an escape from an uninhabitable world. I sit by the artificial logs in the parlor, turning the pages of *Hamlet* over and over. My hands are numb and slow, and there is a constant ache in my bones. We have already paid out seventy dollars for repairs to the furnace, and it is still undependable, the house is still dank and cold.

So I am sitting, on an early December evening, when the spotlight of a taxi sweeps across our front windows. I am sitting alone, with the book on my knees. For the first time in my life, I have wounded my husband's feelings to the point where he cannot remain in the house with me, and I do not even remember what bitter speech it was that drove him out to the Chess Club. He has been gone for an hour, and during that hour I have been pondering a passage in *Hamlet* which has puzzled me for years—Hamlet's retort to Ophelia: "You should not have believed me; for virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish it; I loved you not." It is an obscure and tormenting sentence, and I have not yet found an answer to it when the flare of light darts across my eyes.

Somebody for the neighbors, I think. Nobody for me. Then I see a female figure, slender and wrapped in furs, step out of the cab and pay the driver. She pauses for a few seconds on our path, straightens her shoulders, and walks up the front steps to our door. I sit motionless until the jangling of the bell sounds through the house, and then I start up, as terror-stricken as though a grave could yield up its dead. Opening the

door, I expose myself to an icy blast and a vaguely familiar face.

If she were my own sister, it would be hard for me to recognize her, swathed as she is in gray fur from her knees to her chin, and shrouded to the hairline in a gray woolen hood. "You're Sophie Littman, aren't you?" she says. The voice, more familiar than the presence, begets a series of images, white fall of snow across a fourth-story window, the flash of neon signs, an olive rolling around wildly at the bottom of a little glass. . . . "Tessie March——"

"Yes. I didn't think you'd remember me."

"Of course I remember. Won't you come in?"

She walks into the lamplight, sheds her coat and hood, and lays them over the arm of the sofa. I am shocked by the change that has been wrought upon her by the years. Her brief, Mediterranean beauty is gone and has left her haggard. Recent grief or long dissipation has drawn purplish circles around her eyes. Her mouth is hard, her forehead is crossed by two straight furrows, and there is an artificial shine on her thick black hair. In her ears, at the neckline of her sleek black dress, on her fingers, and at her wrists there is the glitter of jewels; but the dark skin against which they gleam is slack and dry.

"I hope it's all right, my breaking in on you like this," she says. "I wanted to talk to you about Alexandra. There are certain things I thought you might want to know. I brought along a bracelet of hers, and your letters. She saved them all—they were all in her desk in a big envelope."

Even the desperate desire to understand, which freezes me into attention before her, cannot completely wipe out my amazement that she should be standing here in my parlor, offering tidings and tokens from my dead. I have never thought of her with anything but disapproval and resentment. "It was kind of you to go to all that trouble——"

"It wasn't any trouble. I wanted to see you. You were the only one I—— We weren't exactly cordial, were we, that time you came up to the apartment to see her. But you were young, and I was young, and both of us loved her, and we were naturally jealous of each other. Well, I guess there's no more cause for jealousy. We did talk about our grandmothers, though. Yours died in a famine in Poland——" She gives me a quick glance and an embarrassed smile. "Besides, there's that young man of hers. I got to thinking maybe he ought to know. . . ."

"Won't you sit down?"

She sinks into the chair on the hearth and spreads her dark, veined hands before my unsatisfying fire. I pull up a chair, and we sit side by side, staring down at the sickly blue flames and listening to the sigh and sputter of the burning gas.

"That young man of hers," I say at last, "is very sick. He's had a nervous breakdown. He caught pneumonia the day before she died. He was taken to the hospital before I could reach him to tell him what happened. He read about it in the paper, and it drove him out of his mind."

"Then it was as serious as that?"

She has asked the question with the puzzled air of a sophisticate who is always surprised to learn that the rest of us can be solemn over so light a matter as love; and I am offended. I am offended enough to serve her with her just and proper portion of the blame. "It was very serious. Before she went back to New York, that time when you called her long distance, I had every reason to believe she was on the point of getting married."

She does not flush. She makes no attempt to evade my censoring stare. She merely puts a coarse black lock back from her forehead, and tells me, "Yes, she wrote me about that."

"Then why——"

"Because I had to keep my promise. Because I swore to her by everything holy that, no matter where she was or what she was doing, if *he* wanted to get in touch with her, I'd let her know."

"Then she was up there with Ken Ellery? That was why she went."

Her knowing eyes chide me for my romantic dreams of reconciliation, of return after long years to the true beloved. "She saw him once. She had a few cocktails with him in a bar that Thursday afternoon. She met him at four and left him at five or thereabouts. That was all she saw of him. That was all he wanted to see of her. On Friday he went back to the Coast."

"Did she go up there thinking he was coming back to her?"

"If she thought that, she had nobody to blame but herself. I ran into him at a party the night before I

called her long distance. He said it would be nice to see her again, he'd like to have a drink with her before he left town. I'd promised to call her, and I called her and told her exactly what he said—not one word more, so help me God. Still, I should have known she'd think whatever she wanted to. She always deceived herself—she always believed she'd get him back.”

Perhaps it is my old distaste for him, perhaps it is my anger at my own stupidity which makes me protest. “Are you absolutely sure of that? When she came back here, I asked her whether she ever saw him any more, and she said in a kind of offhand way that she hadn't seen him in years.”

The hard, dry lips press together in a smile. There is a strange mixture—wisdom and mockery and pity all at once—in the hazel eyes. “If she had you fooled, it's no wonder. She had everybody fooled, she had everybody believing she'd forgotten about him long ago. But she never forgot him—he was never out of her head for more than an hour. She wanted him back—that's why she drove herself the way she did—she had a crazy notion that if she was famous enough, if she had a great success in this part or that part, he'd see what she was worth and want her back. And in the last few years she got hysterical, she couldn't admit that he'd never come, she had to keep right on piling one glory on top of another. She got wild and ruthless—she'd strike at anybody that stood in her path, she'd do any damned thing—she had to be the best, the first, the biggest name.”

If I protest now, it is against the agony of that futile

effort. "It's a wonder an obsession like that didn't ruin——"

"Ruin her acting, you mean? Fact is, it worked the other way round. She was magnificent to start with, and it made her better still. She was forever beating herself into turning out one masterpiece after the other. You see, she had the crazy idea that *he* hadn't changed—she actually imagined that he was still concerned with artistic standards and masterpieces and such."

"You mean he wasn't any more?"

"Oh, Christ, how could he be, why should he be? A failure, a second-rate actor from the start, an agent who buys and sells cheap comedies and musicals and sits smack in the middle of the rottenness? In the end, he was bound to be tainted himself. And then, too, the poor son of a bitch, he was crippled, he was sick, he was past his best days."

I am amazed that I cannot find it in my heart to hate the man who sent my friend to her grave. I cannot rage at him because he thought it would be nice to have a drink with her after all those years. The elusive, unattainable one, the one who belonged to the Club to which we had no key—the breath of time is blown upon him, and what is he? A buyer and seller stained with the filth of the market, a failure too weary to think any longer about masterpieces and such, a sick man, an aging man, past the meridian, moving on the downward curve that ends in death. And while I see him as he is, she tells me what she came to tell. I am not even jealous that it was she, not I, that heard the story of the last encounter from Alexandra's lips. Of the two of us, she

was, no doubt, the better listener. The drained dryness of the body, the bitter knowledge in the eyes, the mouth that can no longer warn or censure—these are the proper attributes of a priestess who officiates at the last dreary festival of the disillusioned.

Alexandra stayed at Tessie March's place that trip. Her own apartment had been closed for months, and, though I have never seen it, I have a mournful image of sheets laid like shrouds over tables and sofas and chairs, of lamps and chandeliers swathed in white cloths, of fly-specked windows dim and dusty in October sun. She stayed at Tessie's place, although, on the day of her arrival, she wasn't there too long—only long enough to telephone and make a date with him for the following afternoon. The rest of the day was taken up with shopping for the things she wanted to wear—a soft gray suit and a gray hat with a veil and a pair of pigeon wings. . . . I taste the aromatic sweetness of hot saki wine, I see her incandescent face against the sooty stoops and the crooked ailanthus boughs, and I find it difficult to force back my tears. . . . She was restless that evening and sleepless that night. She barely touched her breakfast and pushed her lunch aside, and she had herself dressed a good hour before it was time to set out for the appointed place. She spent that dismal tag-end of time in front of a mirror in Tessie's bedroom, studying the changes that had come upon her face since he saw it last, and trying to convince herself that she had not really changed at all. "I'm not so awfully different, am I, Tessie? Look, when this veil is down like this, you can't even see that there are all

those funny little lines around my mouth and under my eyes."

She had arranged to meet him in a smart, crowded cocktail lounge in an old hotel. She was five minutes early, but he was there when she came in, leaning on the bar and ordering a martini for himself. At the moment of recognition, it seemed to her that her heart expanded, that she would never be able to draw a deep enough breath. But as she advanced toward him through the knots of sleek young women and breezy young men, the sense of fullness ebbed away. For what mortal presence could sustain the weight of her deferred hopes and swollen dreams? Nobody—and surely not this slight, faded person in a tan gabardine suit. He was changed; he was shockingly changed: his cheeks were sunken, the handsome Greek mouth was loose and colorless, and there was only a thin straggling of gray hair behind his veined and spotted brow. They took a table near the window and ordered their drinks. It was a fine day; the sunlight sifted through the green silk curtains. I can see her hand—still chapped and ringless—lying on the top of the table in the sun, and I wonder whether, at any point in that wretched hour, old habit or a resurgence of long-forgotten gallantry prompted him to reach across the dish of crackers between them and touch her hand. They talked, through the first cocktail, of trains and weather, hotels and places to eat. She scarcely listened. She was wondering whether her own flesh had undergone such sad mutations as time had wrought upon him; she was telling herself that the

body made no difference, so long as the heart and mind remained the same.

The heart? The mind? Where were they? Could the blithe arrogance and the steadfast purpose also depart? She tried to talk gravely, from the core of her being, and it was plain that he found it burdensome to answer: he began with forced vigor and then let his sentences trail off half-finished into silence, as though, now that his thought had formed itself, he did not find it worth his breath. She tried to look nakedly into his eyes and saw two disks, opaque and cold, standing guard over whatever lay within. She had a second martini and resorted to shoptalk, to agencies and contracts, to the fool's gold plastered all over the crumbling structure of the American theater, to the devious paths that lead to glory, to the sins against the Holy Ghost. He grew more lively, then, and they seemed to have found a common ground—until a disintegrating realization stopped her running tongue. Good God—the degradation that tormented her conscience—for him it was stuff for gossip, taken for granted, part of the game. Perhaps he even liked it; it was the climate of his life, the only environment that he had known these many years. In fact—she ordered a third martini to dull the stab of the thought—in fact, the only thing they had in common was their moral sickness, their weariness, their disillusionment.

It was late in their conversation—the sunlight was already turning wan on the table—before he came around to mentioning her success. He spoke of it with detachment; he might just as well have been discussing

the career of any other actor; he did not seem to connect the raw child in his mauve and pink living room with the eminent presence on the other side of the table. The praise that he offered was the applause of a stranger, couched in such shop-worn words as had been served out to hundreds of others. Yes, he had seen her twice, once as Portia and once as Millament. Marvelous. Exquisite. Beautiful craftsmanship. But then, who was he to offer an opinion? He wasn't an actor any more, and he'd been away from the classics so long that he wasn't competent to judge. He was a businessman who happened to be connected with the theater, a buyer and seller, a dealer in cheap musicals and comedies.

She could not sit silent, listening to his self-deprecation. Surely he knew that without him she would have been nothing, she said. All that she was, everything that she had done or hoped to do, everything, everything. . . . And, as she spoke, she remembered Lear and Cordelia and the sunlight streaming through the flesh-colored curtains; she remembered the smell of summer coming through the open window, and the back of his hand moving down her cheek with tenderness. She remembered how he had said, "Pray you now, forget and forgive: I am old and foolish." And, remembering that, she wept.

And there it was again, the burden that her ardor had always put upon him in the past. She had driven him back into himself; he did not want her gratitude; he was utterly incapable of dealing with her tears. He waited in frozen silence until she had taken hold of herself. Then he gave her a false and nervous smile.

Jesus, he said, looking at his wrist watch, it was unbelievably late. He'd been having such a fine time that he hadn't noticed. He'd kept her much longer than she'd intended to stay, no doubt. Well, she shouldn't worry about that, he'd hustle her into a taxi. She'd be back at Tessie's in less than ten minutes, with plenty of time to dress for her dinner date. Before she got up from the table, she was guilty of the ultimate indignity: she told him that she had no dinner date, no other plans at all. And he was maneuvered into cruelty; he had to say that he was sorry, he was overdue at his hotel, he had some silly business doings for five-fifteen.

Yet, once he had put her into her taxi, something kept him from turning away—some stirring of remorse or pity made him stand at the open window of the cab, clinging to her hand. And the greatest sorrow of all broke upon her when she knew that she felt nothing at the pressure of his fingers. As the taxi drove off, she could scarcely see the lurching buildings for the tears in her eyes, could scarcely hear the noises of the five o'clock avenue for the drums of drunkenness and desperation that were beating in her head. Then the cabby turned around and said something in a jovial voice. It sounded—she couldn't quite make it out—as if he had asked her whether she had her handbag.

"My handbag?" She was amazed that so normal a voice could come out of her sobbing throat. "Oh, yes, I've got it, it's here on my arm. Why?"

The driver laughed. "Not your handbag, Miss, that wasn't what I said. I asked you whether you got your

hand back. The old gentleman—he was squeezing it so hard I thought he'd never let it go."

The old gentleman. . . . The man-about-town, somewhat the worse for wear, who flirts with a piece of female elegance in the middle of the street. That was how he looked to the rest of the world. The old gentleman. . . . And it was on him that she had spent her life. She leaned back against the seat and laughed out loud, laughed until the tears streamed over her face. And yet, after she had laughed and cried her fill, after she had told the whole ridiculous story to Tessie and had a cup of coffee and washed her face, she must have managed to obliterate that moment of utter disgust, she must have restored to him some portion of his original dignity, she must have seen him again as the King of Britain, at once a fool and a sage, vulnerable and sublime. "Pray you now, forget and forgive: I am old and foolish," she kept saying to herself, over and over. "Pray you now, forget and forgive."

I know by Tessie's still hands that we have come to the end of the story. She has been playing with her rings—perhaps when she was young somebody taught her to substitute that muted and elegant movement for the more magniloquent Mediterranean habit of waving her hands in the air. She has given me much, but I am not yet content. I lean forward and spread my own cold hands before the insufficient flames, and ask myself: What about Les? If we tell him that another man was responsible for her death, we will have to tell him also that she never loved him. And I am amazed to know that my compassion is going out to him. It is

the first compassion I have felt since I stood beside her grave.

"If there's anything else you want to know about——"

"Yes, one more thing. Les Talbot—her young man back here—then she wasn't in love with him at all?"

Now it is she who is offended. She says, in the clipped, distinct accents of the stage, "Where did you ever get an idea like that? Of course she loved him. She wasn't the sort to keep a man on a string for the fun of it, you know."

"Loved him *and* Ken Ellery?"

Her hazel eyes turn full upon me, arraign my provincialism, and pity my naïveté. "Do you really believe that's impossible? Come to think of it, I guess you do. I asked her once, in a letter, why she didn't talk the whole business over with you, and do you know what she said? She said there were certain things you couldn't talk about to a decent married woman who'd stuck to one man all her life. The implication's pretty obvious. She couldn't talk to you, but she could talk to me. You're decent——" She gives me a mocking, almost merry smile. "You're decent, and I'm a—— Oh, well, what's the difference? It's over and done with, isn't it?" Her smile turns kind. She leans across the space between us and lays her long, manicured, bejeweled fingers on my broad, housewifely hand. "It's all right, Sophie," she says, "forget and forgive."

She stands up then and goes to the sofa and begins to pull a series of objects out of the silky pockets of her fur coat: my letters to Alexandra, neatly tied up

with a brown raffia ribbon; a bracelet wrapped in tissue paper; another letter, separate from the batch and marked all over with postal directions: AIR MAIL, REGISTERED, SPECIAL DELIVERY. This last letter—I notice as she comes back and stands between me and the fire—is a crisp, recent one, addressed to her in Alexandra's hand.

"This one," she says, laying it in my lap, "was written and mailed the evening before she died. She wanted me to get it before I saw the morning papers—and I did. It came on Sunday afternoon, not more than ten minutes before I got the telegram. You can borrow it. Show it to the young man, if you want to. You needn't hurry about sending it back. I want it just to keep. I don't need it to read any more. I know it off by heart." She turns then, quickly, to hide the tears that are hanging on her stiff eyelashes. She puts on her hood and ties it under her chin. "There's no use calling a taxi," she says. "I noticed when I came down that there's a cab station just up the street."

"I wish you wouldn't run off like this. I wish I could offer you something to drink. There isn't a drop of liquor in the house. We——"

She reaches for her coat, and I come to help her into it.

"Oh, that's all right," she says. "I'll get a scotch and soda back at the hotel. I'm off again tomorrow at eight, and I guess I'd better get some sleep."

She opens the door, and we stand on the threshold in the icy wind, gazing at each other. I try to thank her, but such words as I can summon up seem meager and

cold. Then, suddenly, she is holding out her arms to me, and I am close to her. Her arms are around my shoulders, her lips are against my cheek; and I know without jealousy that these arms, these lips have often comforted my dead.

"Don't grieve too much, Sophie," she says. "She wouldn't want you to grieve too much. You go back to your husband and your children, and I'll go back to my acting. That's what she'd want us to do. She wouldn't have liked us to stand around wailing over her grave. It's useless anyhow, isn't it? She's not in her grave. She's just gone."

I nod, and she kisses me, and I kiss her. She goes out and pulls the door shut behind her, but I open it again and stand on the threshold to watch her walking up the street. At the corner she turns and waves. I will never see her again, that I know. I weep a little before I sit down by the fire to look at the letter. I weep warm, quiet tears, knowing that there is still something left to us in this miserable world: it is still possible to forget and forgive.

Saturday evening

"Dear Tessie:

"I hope with all my heart this letter reaches you some time on Sunday, before the Monday morning papers are on the street. I'm writing it at the Ramsay—I've taken a room here for the night. I should have liked to spend this last night in my own house, in the parlor, in front of the fire. But if I stayed at home Les might call me, and if he called I might not have the fortitude

to stay away from the telephone. I never had much courage, and now I'm very tired. If he should call or come, if I should hear his dear voice or feel the warmth of him against me, all my determination might disappear, I might not have the strength for doing what it is right and necessary for me to do.

"On Friday night when I left you at the station, I told you I was going back home to get myself married. That was a lie. You must forgive me, Tessie—I told you a lot of things that were crazy and exaggerated in my day—but that was the only time I ever told you a deliberate lie. I knew I would have to break with him. That was the first thing I knew when I came out of that foolish, useless fit of crying. And before I go, I want to tell you my reasons, because I have a conviction that nobody ought to go without telling his reasons, and you are the only one who could understand.

"In the first place, he is so good, he is so utterly good, Tessie. He has never sinned against the Holy Ghost. He hasn't learned the art of arguing white and black into dirty gray. He has managed to spend twenty-seven years in this world, and he still has clean hands and a pure heart. For a little while, I deceived myself into thinking I could borrow some blessed and healing property from him. Sometimes when the two of us were together, it seemed to me that his virtue was restoring my own, was turning me back into an honorable and loving child. But that was a happy dream I dreamed to console myself, perhaps even to give myself the strength I will need when tomorrow is here. No matter how untainted he was, he couldn't change me. No,

‘virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock,’ and in the end, I was forced to say ‘I loved you not.’ And yet, believe me, I loved Les Talbot. All the little wide-eyed virgins in the world ‘could not, with all their quantity of love, make up my sum.’

“I hope to God, when I am dead and buried and beyond all answering back, nobody so confuses the story as to give him the notion that I left him because I loved Ken Ellery. If I had still loved Ken Ellery last Thursday afternoon, if my high, reasonless dream could have withstood and transcended the reality, if there had remained in my body one drop of the old devotion, the old faithfulness—then I would have married my boy, then I could have believed that, no matter what ravages the sickness in my spirit made in me, it would be possible for him to love me still. But I know now that it is neither right nor possible to love a ruin. Even my obsession could not convince me that I loved the sorry shadow of Ken Ellery, and Les is far saner than I am, Les is sane enough to see his mistake. Worst of all, he might remain with me out of gallantry or tenderness, and I cannot bear the thought that my darling would close his eyes to my deterioration, would coarsen his spirit to make it compatible with mine.

“For you see, Tessie, I am already sick in the spirit. Nothing, not even Les, can cure me any more. I have lived so long on dreams of love that I cannot be certain I could deal with love itself. There is a fever of unreality about everything I think and everything I do. I might be serviceable as a wise man’s mistress, but I

would only be destructive as a good man's bride. And Les is good, he is so very good—— Forgive me, Tessie, I've said that before.

"There's only one thing that troubles me now: the wretched, miserable mess I made of our last time together. All the way home on the train, I kept thinking how I'd manage it. I thought I'd keep him at a distance, I thought I'd be remote and cold. But he kissed me, he begged me, he kept clinging to my hand, and I loved him so much. After an hour of that, I was hysterical and wild, and said—thank God I can't remember what I said. Whatever I said, he will eventually forget. Two years, three years, and I will be more shadowy to him than Ken Ellery is to me tonight. And my going away like this, though it may be dreadful for him for a while, will eventually be something for his art to grow upon.

"And my art? You probably wonder how I can go out of this world without so much as a backward glance at my art. You always set great store by it, God bless you. You fed me when I was hungry and comforted me when I had no hope, and I take a kind of pleasure even now in the thought that, in return for all your free-handed kindness, I gave you some small satisfaction through my success. But my art is finished—we know that, you and I. As you were the first to see the promise of my ascent, so you were the first to sense the early symptoms of my decline. I am tired, I have compromised; and, the more weary I become, the more I will compromise. My art is stultified and dead inside me. What I accomplish now, I do, not from the living inner

core, but only by rote. I would have continued to be successful, at least for a fair number of years. But from this point on, my success would be like a fungus growing on the dead body of my art.

"No, it is better that I go now, and I go with a surprisingly small number of regrets. I have much to gain by going—I've been frightened so long, I'm so tired of goading myself—I have much to gain and very little to lose. I am sorry only to part with my friends, and I am already far enough away from the world to be honestly glad that I will lose more in leaving them than they will lose in parting with me. Dear Tessie, you know that I was a difficult friend at best. I was cursed from my childhood with an oversupply of those things which are acceptable only in properly limited quantities. I had too much faith, too much desire for perfection, too much devotion to truth, and, above all, too great a capacity for love. To you, and to those other dear beings whom I will think about tomorrow when I take myself off, I owe an embarrassing apology. I want to be forgiven for asking too much and for offering too much. The first is a human fault, common to the race. But the second is peculiarly my own.

"Good-by, now, Tessie. Thanks again for everything. Please don't torment yourself about the hours I must spend between this hour and the time I die. Death is easy; it is far, far easier than living. I'm warm, I'm sleepy, I will sleep out the night, and I am not afraid.

All my love,
Alexandra."

I am setting out for St. Francis Hospital, where I am to have a talk with Emil Schroeder, M.D. He sounded very pleasant over the telephone yesterday. He made no mention whatsoever of my long delay, seemed delighted to hear that I had the letter, and, when I outlined its contents to him, said, in a rising crescendo of enthusiasm, "Good, very good, very good indeed!" I have put the letter into my purse, buttoned my tightening coat around me, and come out into a morning of ice-encased trees and bushes glittering in the sun. Our porch steps are as smooth and shiny as a mirror, and I am surprised to find myself walking warily, clinging to the railing, conscious for the first time that I might destroy, with one false step, the vulnerable being within.

For weeks I have been lifting and bending with the recklessness of a virgin. I have been telling my child with every movement that he can live or die for all I care; I will not shield him; I will not make an easy path for him into this intolerable world; if he chooses to come into it, let his coming be on his own head. And now suddenly, on the way to St. Francis Hospital, I walk as I walked when I carried Susie and Jonathan. Watch the child, I tell myself, be careful of the child.

Is it remorse over my early resentment that makes me doubly tender of him now? Or is it some secret instinct in the blood, some survival of the Messianic hope that made my ancestors be fruitful and multiply even by the waters of Babylon? My scalp and my fingertips tingle because a new thought has stirred in me, as awesome and reassuring as the first movement of life within.

Somewhere, in the dark womb of some incorrigible mother, a long-awaited being may be drinking the blood of life from our old stock. He may be with us even now, bearing the holy promise in his clenched fists—promise of a time when no mortal can be cursed with too much faith, too much desire for perfection, too much devotion to the truth, too much love.

Date Γ

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